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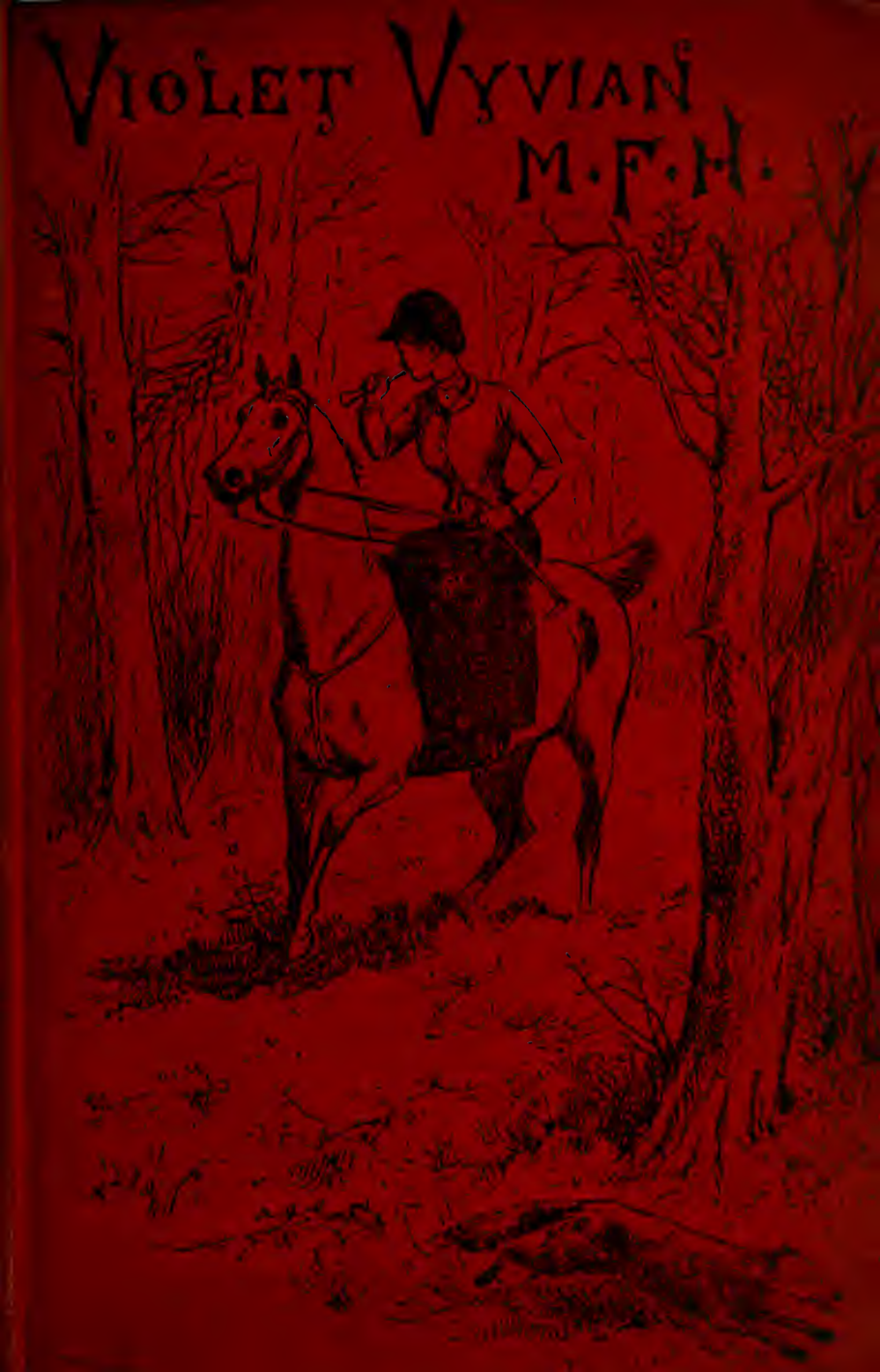

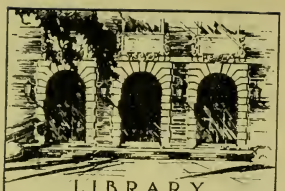

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VIOLET VYVIAN, M.F.H.

VOL. III.

VIOLET VYVIAN
M. F. H.

BY

MAY CROMMELIN
AUTHOR OF 'QUEENIE,' 'BROWN EYES,' ETC.

AND

J. MORAY BROWN
AUTHOR OF 'SHIKAR SKETCHES,' 'POWDER, SPUR, AND SPEAR,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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THE THIRD VOLUME.

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VIOLET VYVIAN, M.F.H.

CHAPTER I.

THE DIE IS CAST.

As has been said, Mrs. O'Brien was not happy at this time in her own mind. And, being unhappy, she grew careless about her health. She would sit in her habit for hours after being rain-soaked, and absolutely court draughts, as it seemed, with a wayward pleasure in exposing herself to illness and discomfort.

'You have a horrid cough, dear; I have noticed it for the last three weeks. Do be more careful,' Violet pleaded. But with inexplicable

perversity Kate could not be induced to take common care of herself; she seemed to feel a certain pride in the anxiety and sympathy occasionally expressed by both Rufus and Violet as days passed away and her cough became apparently habitual.

As the spring advanced, Kate began to believe herself doomed to early consumption; and, strange to say, an almost pleasurable self-pity and melancholy stole over her at the thought.

'I cannot live long,' she told herself, sighing. 'If only this hateful engagement were broken off first, I believe I could die happy; for, it may be wicked of me—but I hate Cyril! If Violet *does* marry Jack Ramsay after my death, at least I shall have ended my days here at Forde happily.'

So thinking, gradually the idea grew and grew to conviction in Kate's mind that it was not only a kindness, but her solemn duty towards Violet to interfere once more in the latter's prospects of marriage. Whether she

really went the length of honestly wishing her friend to marry Jack and be happy at last, she herself hardly knew. At moments, fevered with self-reproach, she did; but always she thirsted to see Cyril baulked of what she chose to imagine his greed to share Violet's wealth.

'I *can* do it! And, if he pushes me to it, I *will!*' she repeated, as she had once said to herself when she first heard the ill-news. There was an exultant sense of superior power in knowing that a thunderbolt lay forged and ready to her hand, hidden upstairs in a little secret drawer. It was needed sooner than she thought.

Violet had meanwhile taken a serious thinking-fit after that day of the election. Of course she had always been uneasily aware that 'some day' she must cease to put off Cyril so repeatedly, and would be driven to name a fixed time for her wedding. He was very good and patient, and she was treating him rather hardly, she knew. It could not go on in this way for ever.

Margaret Beaumont said the same thing to her.

'Do you know that everybody is talking of your adventure, and wondering if your cousin is not to be rewarded in the approved fashion of all knights who rescued distressed damsels. Seriously, dear, are you never going to announce your engagement?'

'All in good time. Why should I be driven to it by these gossiping people who have apparently nothing better to do than to discuss my affairs?' cried Violet, restlessly. 'I leave them alone: why must they meddle with me?'

'Because you must suffer the penalty of being a greater person than most of them. You are our Portia, with her sunny locks that—"hang on her temples like a golden fleece." It is only human nature that the neighbours should watch all the Jasons who come in quest of you.'

'*All*, do you say? Why, Margaret, there are few enough who can try the venture. You speak of Portia. If you only knew how often I have thought of her position, and likened my

own to it, where she says: "O, me! the word 'choose.' I may neither choose whom I would nor refuse whom I dislike; so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father."'

It was the first time Margaret had ever heard Violet speak with real bitterness of Mr. Vyvian's strange will. The girl had been very fond of the whimsical and obstinate, but warm-hearted old squire; plainly it was only of late that his last oddity of humour, as regarded his daughter, had been felt so irksome by the latter. She answered soothingly, the matter being hopeless as to alteration,

'Come, Violet, you have at least been able to refuse whom you dislike. As to Cyril, I was only going to tell you that some of the other girls about here seem to think it hard that they cannot guess whether he is off or on with you. Several of them would set their caps at him, I assure you, if they could be certain you would leave them a fair field. Miss Quid, I hear, was tremendously elated that Cyril rode home with

her one day last week after hunting, and she is giving her friends to understand she could cut you out if she tried.'

'Really!' returned Violet, with a little contemptuous laugh. But her cheek flushed slightly, and wily Margaret saw that the well-tipped shaft had done its intended work—the Miss Quid thus nicknamed, because the daughter of a rich London cigar-merchant, who had lately bought a large place in the Marshwood Vale district, being our young M.F.H.'s special aversion. 'I am surprised that the tobacco heiress should even deign to think of Cyril. I hear she announced lately to Rufus that she was so glad to have been "born at this sensible time of day, when money can do anything, and nobody cares two straws about old family, or any such old-fashioned nonsense." She always stares me up and down at the meets, and is almost rude, on the principle of not kowtowing to me, though I am an M.F.H.'

'You forget that Cyril is very nice-looking; and, "a man's a man," in these country parts

where there are so few marriageable *partis*,' laughed Margaret. 'I daresay Miss Quid thinks herself rich enough for any husband; besides, she may have a secret hankering for marrying good family, whatever she may please to say.'

'Yes; on the principle that made the old father indulge himself in a coat-of-arms and family portraits, when he was made an alderman. Did you hear what Kate O'Brien had the coolness to say to the daughter last week?' answered Violet, rather revelling in the recollection. 'I was forced to speak pretty sharply to the young woman because she had nearly ridden over one of the hounds, my favourite old Lavender; so she observed to Kate afterwards, it was a pity that I disliked to see any girl riding well to the front except myself. There were several men near, some of them Miss Quid's special admirers (at least she believes so), therefore you can imagine with what satisfaction Kate pointed out to her that *even* in the hunting-field some people have to keep their proper places, and that I was unfortunately obliged to

retain mine as Mistress. "Well," returned Miss Quid, "all I can say is that my motto out hunting, and everywhere else, is 'Go ahead!' and my father always says it was his in life too." "You don't say so," exclaimed Kate, pretending surprise. "Why, somebody told me, I am nearly certain, that your father had chosen such a delightful one when he first set up a carriage; '*Quid rides*,' is not that it? I have such a wretched memory, I have forgotten already what it means, but something appropriate I know to his being so justly proud of his success in life as a self-made man. Perhaps some of you can translate the Latin?" she went on, turning sweetly to the men around. Rufus says their faces were a splendid sight.'

It might have been in consequence of this little conversation that, on the following day, Miss Vyvian was noticed by all the Marshwood Vale Hunt as riding with even more than her usual pluck and fixed determination to be in the very front of the van. It would be nonsense, of course, to affirm that so brilliant a horse-

woman as Violet had often shown herself to be, and one who was decidedly a leader and favourite in the society of the county, could possibly care in the least about the attempted rivalry of the tobacco-merchant's daughter. Yet, for some unknown cause, she felt on her mettle. And, when the brown twilight fell and the day was done, instead of jogging homeward in the company of old Mr. Bentley, or some of the Hunt magnates, Violet manœuvred for the first time in her life to get beside her cousin, having noticed that Miss Quid was eagerly trying to engage him in conversation.

A look from Violet, and Cyril turned to her in an instant.

'Will you give a message for me to Tom,' she said. 'And then I think we may as well be going home together.'

Cyril was delighted. As a rule, Violet demurred to riding back to Forde alone with him, just because their secret was such a matter of general curiosity.

By-and-by, as the neighbours dispersed by

twos and threes, and the clatter of hoofs died away along different roads, the cousins found themselves alone in a real south-country lane, with high banks topped by bushes that almost met overhead. The lane was so steep a descent they had to go carefully; so narrow they perforce rode close to each other. Cyril put his hand affectionately on his cousin's saddle, and said, looking pleadingly in her face,

'Dear Violet, I wish very much you would promise me something. It makes me so unhappy to see you ride as you did to-day. You know how often you have put me off with a laugh about this very thing—don't do so any more. Even old Mr. Bentley told me he had spoken to you about it once before, and flattered himself you were more careful for a few days afterwards. If you were so good only to please him, surely you might do as much and a little more for *my* sake!'

'What do you want me to promise?' asked Violet, with a slightly hard ring of voice, as her face clouded. 'You would not have me give

up hunting altogether; don't ask that, Cyril. It is the chief amusement of my life and the one thing I most care for. It does so *take me out of myself*.'

'The longing to forget self is what unhappy people generally feel;' and you, surely, have almost all that heart can wish for. You used not to be so utterly devoted to hunting, Violet. But no'—and there were absolutely tears in Cyril's eyes as he added, after a pause, 'don't break your neck. That is all I ask of you.'

The tormenting spirit that sometimes causes us to put those who love us to pain for the pleasure of seeing them suffer for our sakes, and thus prove their love, tempted Violet to answer, against her better nature,

'Well, and if I *did* break my neck, Cyril?—it would only be a way of handing you over the Forde estate, without myself as an encumbrance.'

She laughed lightly as she said so, but stopped as Vyvian looked at her. He gave her a piteous glance, like that of a devoted dog unjustly

punished. Then he said in a low voice, that came plainly from his very heart,

'You are far dearer to me than Forde Manor and all the estate. I should hate the place and all belonging to it, were such a blow to fall upon me. I believe I should go *mad!*'

'No; not that,' said Violet, soothingly, a little disturbed by a wild look in Cyril's light-blue eyes, and the distraught, troubled expression that passed over his face. 'You are a silly old Cyril to take up what I say in such a serious way. Come, now, we are at the foot of the hill; shall we trot ahead?'

But, with her cousin's words, the conviction had sunk deep into Violet's mind that Cyril meant fully what he said. She believed he did love herself far above all that she possessed. Her wealth gilded his prospects of future life with the gleam of Eldorado; but it was she, the woman, who would make Eldorado into something far holier and happier to him, into paradise. He not only loved her, but had twined his affection and thoughts so around her stronger

nature for support that with an inward sigh, realising the situation, she told herself he might indeed almost go mad were she to fail him now in her promise of marriage.

Presently they were overtaken by one of the whips, who brought a message from Mr. O'Brien that the latter and Kate were asked to dine at the Blatherwicks, and they hoped Miss Vyvian would excuse them. Mr. O'Brien's dog-cart was to be sent with their evening clothes, and to bring them back at night.

'I shall send my brougham. As if Kate could go driving about the country at night in a dog-cart with that terrible cough of hers,' observed Violet a little indignantly. 'I wonder Rufus could allow her to think of such a thing! She will really go into a consumption unless he takes better care.'

'Do you suppose poor old Rufus would go if he could help himself?' remarked Cyril, drily. 'There are two or three of the officers from Slushborough staying with Billy Blatherwick; they form the attraction for Mrs. O'Brien, I

presume. Violet—if you flirt like that when we are married, how miserable I shall be!'

A little tightening came in the muscles round Violet's heart, as the thought struck her, she fervently hoped that the one man whom, even after marriage, she might still be tempted to care for more than her husband should never then cross her path. But he was far away; years work such changes, too——

'It is not likely, dear,' she said, gently, and felt a little penitent for even that momentary thought. 'Try me, and trust me!'

Just then they passed the rusty gates leading to the old manor-house; grass was growing on the drive; two of the ancient elms forming an avenue had been blown down lately, and still lay uprooted. The grounds looked altogether dismal, as a country place will when neglected, especially in winter, and Cyril gave a little irrepressible shudder.

'Ugh! I feel somehow at times as if I am nearing my own grave, when I ride home in the evening. Well, it may be so, who knows?

You would not allow me to have the roof mended, Violet, and it will not hold up much longer.'

'Nonsense. You must content yourself with the shelter of mine, "some day," you know,' returned Violet; then, with a certain pity stirring her that she could not account for, she added, obeying a sudden impulse, 'Come and dine with me to-night. We shall only have each other's society, but no matter.'

'Only,' echoed Cyril, a gleam lighting up his pale-blue eyes. 'That is my idea of the sum of human happiness, to have you to myself. Do you so much mind having *only* me to talk to?'

'By no means; but we shall have so much of each other's company by-and-by,' replied Violet, in a cheerful, common-sense voice.

'When is that time to begin, Violet?'

But Cyril's question, though uttered impassionately, was not then answered; for, with a little laugh, Harlequin's mistress gave that good animal a sign to get homewards, and

trotting away on the roadside turf she looked back to call out,

'Don't be late! I hate cold cinders for dinner, and you are never in time.'

Cyril, although of a dilatory nature, was over at Forde Manor under an hour. What an evening of bliss that was to him! It was the first and only one he had ever spent alone with Violet; and he blessed the O'Briens a hundred times in his heart. After dinner and coffee they strolled into the dimly-lit conservatory. Cyril, as he enjoyed his cigarettes, revelled in the tropical atmosphere, and grew dreamy and romantic. Violet laughed at his lotus-eater's fancies; however lovely the green creepers and passion-flowers drooping from overhead, and the jungly suggestions of the big tree-ferns and palms of her winter-garden, it was undeniably a dripping and steaming spot.

'This is delicious,' murmured Cyril, as, sitting on a seat beside Violet, he stole his arm round her waist. 'I could wish to stay here for ever with you; to dream our lives away together in

just such a twilight, fragrant land as one can imagine here around us. Tell me, dearest, can you picture to yourself more perfect rapture than such an existence?'

'Yes, I can! To be out in the green woods on a fresh spring morning, or to have a gallop on the downs with a brisk air blowing about one, is far more wholesome to my mind,' replied Violet, promptly. 'We will stay here all this evening to please you, Cyril; but to live so in the future!—I should feel as if shut up in a room with a bronchitis-kettle always on the boil.'

'Ah! that future together. Sometimes I feel as if it would *never* come,' said her cousin, low; and there was a touch of sudden pain in his voice that startled the girl beside him as something new.

'I thought—I hoped you had been happy during our engagement,' she faltered, feeling troubled, and trying to nerve herself to a decision that she knew must come sooner or later.

'Happy! you have made me so utterly happy that I almost tremble at the thought of realis-

ing still greater bliss! At moments, lately, I have even thought to myself that I must be fated to an early death—don't be startled, dearest! And don't laugh at me for confessing my weakness. But does Fate long allow us poor mortals to be so utterly glad to live; so loth to leave you and this life as I should be? There! I have troubled you—your dear face looks quite sad. Don't be sad, Violet, my best beloved. To me it seems quite a beautiful idea, a sweet death to pass from this earth in the very flush of the greatest gladness it can give. Before the cup of pleasure has been drained—before——'

'Before I grow gray, and you grow stout. Before you find out that you are getting just a little tired of me. O, Cyril! I should never have thought it of you,' interrupted Violet, half-laughing, half-crying; for there was an intensity of feeling underlying Cyril's words that gave her a sense of uneasiness in spite of herself. He was often sentimental, but his fancies did not take this morbid turn. 'I declare it is enough to

make me resolve to be married at once, to disprove such silly nonsense. And I will promise to torment you from the beginning; just to teach you that life can never be too utterly blissful while there are such things as weekly books, and big bills at Christmas, and servants' worries.'

'At once! Do you mean it—do you really mean that?' and, murmuring expressions of endearment, Cyril caught Violet's hand and gazed in her face as if disbelieving his own senses at the immediate prospect of such joy.

'If a thing has to be done, I suppose one may as well make up one's mind to do it,' said Violet, giving a little laugh of nervousness. 'But at once!—Well, you see, one wants the wedding-dress to be properly fitted, and——'

'Don't put me off any more; you have done that so long, dear,' pleaded Cyril. 'Only say when—at last.'

'We must have a pink wedding, I suppose; so it should be at the end of the hunting-

season,' said Violet, slowly. 'Let me see—six weeks.'

'No, no; a month hence,' cried Cyril, passionately, and pressed her hand to his lips.

CHAPTER II.

STORM-CLOUDS.

KATE O'BRIEN was ill the next day, in spite of returning home in the brougham. But then she had insisted upon keeping both windows down, and leaning forward in a thorough draught, on a cold, rainy night; so Rufus told everyone, with real annoyance at her perversity. He did not tell, however, what he had a faint guess of in his vexation—that, feeling filled with wrath at his wife's madness in accepting such an invitation in her state of health—for to hear her cough was torture to the good-hearted fellow—and angered also at her rather pronounced flirtation with some of the officers

from Slushborough, besides feeling himself tired after his day's hunting, and longing for his easy-chair and a nap after dinner, Rufus had indulged more freely than was altogether good for him in his host's old madeira. It drowned his annoyance, but Kate was disgusted with his wine-laden breath, and declaring he was reeking with tobacco she inhaled the bitter east wind, leaning as far away from him as possible.

Next day Madam Wilful was astonished to find the old family doctor of the neighbourhood entering her room, with hardly a—'By your leave!' She tried anger, but her husband would not stand any more trifling. So, seeing rebellion was useless, Kate resigned herself; feeling that after all it was perhaps time the doctor should break the hopeless state of her illness to her husband and friends. That good man certainly looked serious, and gave her rather severe instructions to be careful, with orders to keep her room for a week. Kate meekly bowed her beautiful head and felt convinced she was doomed to near dissolution, coughing her heart

out the while. Once outside her door, however, the wily Galen rubbed his hands.

'Purely nervous! quite a nervous cough, I assure you,' he said, smiling in the anxious faces of the husband and hostess. 'Our patient has in fact a splendid constitution, and, if you can simply make her take ordinary care of herself, is likely to outlive us all. Only—don't tell her so.'

For ten days, therefore, Kate was coaxed to live an invalid's life, between her bed and the boudoir sofa. Most mornings Rufus and Violet had to pull regretfully long faces and leave her, being *obliged* to go out hunting. Kate looked a sort of eternal farewell at them out of her glorious dark eyes; then, smiling a faint martyr smile, strove to put up with Margaret Beaumont's cheerful society, who had at once taken the charge of the sick-room on her own shoulders.

One fine morning, however, Kate resolved to surprise them all by her reappearance in daily life, though firmly believing herself really

in a critical state. It was a rather affecting idea to her own mind that, with a faint rally of strength, she should struggle down among the others who were well and enjoying themselves, and she did feel strangely, remarkably strong. An outburst of greeting hailed her.

'Why, Kate—you are quite like yourself again,' from Violet. 'As fit as a fiddle,' put in Rufus. 'Never looked better in all your life,' said Cyril, with more politeness but less warmth in his voice than the others.

'What are these? what are you all doing?' asked Kate, supporting herself by the big hall-table, and looking with a sudden chill fear in her heart at a pile of half-opened boxes and tissue-paper wrappings disclosed therein.

'They are wedding-presents,' explained Violet, with an apologetic feeling and a blush, she hardly knew why. 'All yesterday and to-day they have been pouring in. Look! here are eight travelling-clocks already, and five aneroids for Cyril, and enough blotting-books to stock Girton, and——'

'Then the engagement is announced; everyone knows it in the country, apparently!' As Kate put the question, demanding as it were to know, she never heeded Violet, but looked full at Cyril.

'Everyone!' answered Vyvian steadily enough, though feeling uncomfortable. 'We thought it was time to let our friends share our happiness, did not we, dear?' turning with a rather nervous though proud smile to Violet. 'There never was anything like the way her hand was nearly shaken off at the meet—when was it? last Thursday week—after they got wind of our secret.'

'Last Thursday week—the very day I was taken ill,' repeated Kate, slowly, with a curious smile curving her lips. 'Come! some of you might have told me the news, just to amuse me when I was laid up. Why did not *you*, Rufus?'

Rufus stroked his big moustache apart, and was understood to observe he could not say. Neither could he tell his wife that he was afraid the news would be displeasing to her. He knew

too well that the marriage-peal rung at Forde church would mean to her mind the knell of her own 'good time.' Rufus was sincerely fond of his wife, and he was to be pitied in his perplexity.

'I've a confounded twinge in my foot,' he groaned. 'I hope—I do hope it does not mean gout. Kate, my poor girl, it will be hard if you get well only to nurse me, eh? You won't like that!'

As it turned out, Kate did not like it. For Rufus had prophesied too truly. A few days later he was laid up with a most undeniable fit of gout.

'It's deuced hard on her,' he kept repeating, referring to his wife. 'Poor little woman! she would have liked so much to go up to town and help in choosing the wedding finery.'

No one, however, seemed to share greatly in his sympathy for Kate, under the hardship of thus being called on to perform her wifely duty. Rufus himself would have allowed her to go, and have remained alone at Forde, with only

the servants to take care of him. But the doctor and Violet so received this suggestion as unheard of, assuming as a matter of course the impossibility of Kate's even wishing to leave him under the circumstances, that she felt perforce obliged to stay and put as good a face on the matter as possible. Perhaps there was some ground for pitying her afterwards, for her husband—feeling he had shown all self-denial in offering to forego her services, but that as she *had* stayed to nurse him he might as well reap the advantages of them—proved as fractious and fidgety as most of his sex in illness.

For about three weeks, therefore, Violet was busied in town, between dressmakers, milliners, and lawyers, chaperoned meanwhile by Margaret Beaumont, who like all women revelled in the excitement in choosing a trousseau. Cyril of course was also with them, staying at the same hotel, and taking them to the theatre at night. He had hurried up to London before them, in order to hasten the lawyers' work of drawing up the settlements, and was in a

seventh heaven of feverish happiness and impatience.

A month had therefore elapsed since first the long-expected news of Miss Vyvian's engagement was made public: in another week, or little more, the wedding was fixed to take place. Five weeks! it was rather a short time, insinuated some of Violet's few detractors, among them Miss Quid. But any little hints of, 'Marry in haste,' and so forth, were soon silenced in the universal pæan of pleasure and congratulation that went up from the voice of the whole country round.

Firstly, Violet was a county favourite; secondly, she had absolutely accomplished that rare feat of pleasing almost everybody by her marriage. Old men praised her good sense in not making any silly love-match, and in keeping the property together and being obedient to her dead father's will. Matrons were secretly delighted that Lord Guisard was still to be had. He was a rich matrimonial prize, while Cyril had always been only an ineligible. Hearts

are caught so often in the rebound from the dead wall of a denial. So everyone might now set their caps afresh, trusting that in his chagrin Lord Goosie might hasten to marry the 'first best' of their daughters who now should please his colourless aristocratic eyes. Hitherto, alas! his heart had no more felt love's pricks than would a well stuffed pin-cushion. As to the young men and maidens, they all discussed or envied Cyril's good luck; and, though some of the latter foolish virgins privately agreed there was not much romance or excitement about this engagement, of which everybody reminded everybody else that they had always prophesied it would come to pass, still 'it was quite the proper thing.' And a pink wedding, the wedding of their own pretty and uncommon kind of M.F.H., was quite a delightful idea—just the right event with which to wind up the hunting-season.

Several of the Marshwood Vale Hunt took a malicious pleasure in condoling with Guisard, or in asking what he thought of the news; if

they met him at dinner-parties, or when dispensing justice from the magisterial bench. On these occasions his lordship looked a little pale and decidedly sullen, but invariably made the same answer, drawling out,

'Aw, as to Vyvian—not surprised. Poor chap, there was nothing for him but the workhouse or the union; naturally he preferred the latter.'

'Never thought Goosie had it in him to be so sharp,' said one.

'But,' remarked another, 'don't you hear how he says it, like repeating his lesson; his mother has primed him. She doesn't want him to look more foolish than nature meant him to be.'

But they were wrong, for all that. Mrs. O'Brien could have told them who made the rejected suitor a handsome present of his words, at the quiet corner of a covert the first day she was out for an hour or two in the pony-carriage after her illness. She dared not be the one to hint openly that Cyril was fortune-seeking, but

she had taught herself to believe it, and laughed bitterly in her sleeve as Guisard persistently repeated his parrot-reply. Rufus was very wrathful when old Squire Bentley, who came to visit him during the gout period, related what Goosie was saying.

'Please the pigs, I'll teach him manners, the little *crowl!*' he exclaimed, referring to the smallest specimen of a porcine litter which is often a pigmy amongst its brethren. 'I'd have him to know that a gentleman of good old family is none the worse for being poor; and Vyvian's great grandfather was keeping his own hounds when my Lord Guisard's was blacking boots at an inn, as all the world knows. And by the soles of those same, if he hadn't put a better polish on the uppers than his great grandson does on his behaviour, it's kicked out he'd have been. No matter! let the fool say what he likes . . . (Confound this foot of mine!) . . . Hooroo! I'll be well anyhow for Violet's wedding, and throw an old shoe after her for good luck!'

'Throw your *brogue*, Rufus! you could not do better,' came in quick rejoinder from Madam Kate in the background, with a scornful curl of her lip. And while O'Brien burst into a great laugh of appreciation—the sally, however, having been first made by the wittiest of living, old Irish priests, and his own friend—Squire Bentley thought slowly to himself he should not care for a wife whose mellifluous words had such a sub-acid flavour as he fancied he detected in Kate's accents.

If any of Kate O'Brien's friends could have seen at this time into her heart, they would have been surprised at the sea of bitterness tossing and seething therein. At times she told herself that if hell, as says Marlowe's Faust, has no limits nor set place, 'for where we are is hell,' and Mephistopheles, answering the query why he is not therein, replies,

> 'Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it!'

then she, too, had begun to taste its punishment in a measure. She believed herself remorseful:

the very pain of mind she was suffering seemed expiatory, for Kate's idea of Hades was purgatorial. And yet she could hardly endure the thought of Cyril—he whom she had spurned, whose passion she had amused herself by arousing, playing with, rejecting—that he should now be the one to dispossess her from the dear delights of Forde. It was like a worm turning at last; a weak, despised victim gaining the victory; and she longed to crush him, to set her heel on his neck. How dared he, after having gladly kissed the very ground under her feet, now pretend to love another girl under her own eyes! Her vanity made Kate utterly disbelieve in Cyril's present attachment being genuine; her quick insight, where not blinded by self-conceit, made her perceive that Violet's affections were not deeply stirred, though honest liking, the sense of duty, and tender pity, were all engaged on behalf of Vyvian.

'A very nice mixture, but the brew isn't love,' thought Kate, darkly; her own definition of love was passion, which might, or more likely

might not, be lasting. 'She is taking the moon because she can't get the sun! I declare, I will give her a chance. Come what may, she ought not to chain herself into such dull connubial slavery. *Anything* would be better for her; *and for us!*'

No one knew the strain Kate put upon herself those dreary days to wait upon Rufus hand and foot, and not betray the impatience that consumed her. She chafed like one in prison, who knows the file and saw to work deliverance are close at hand, but cannot yet be used.

When Violet left for London she had spoken of returning in a week; then came a letter explaining delays, A fortnight passed, and the little party still lingered in town, evidently enjoying themselves too much to have time to describe their doings—except by writing, 'they had no time to write,' but that they *must* stay on to see Sarah Bernhardt and hear the newest singer and sign stupid papers. Then Kate grew wild!

A dozen times she began a letter, that if ever finished would have been addressed to Cyril Vyvian, Esquire; a dozen times she tore up, then carefully burnt the fragments.

'No use writing—he is so weak. I *must see* him!' she always repeated between her teeth. 'He cannot help coming soon, if even he is purposely avoiding me. I must lure him to an interview; not frighten him off.'

She was right enough that Vyvian was, if not frightened, yet distinctly uncomfortable at the idea of being thrown alone in her company. He had an impression Kate might be—well, disagreeable in her references to bygones, so he had not only avoided her all the winter but especially of late, and urged Violet to remain in town as long as possible. Margaret Beaumont backed him up in this without his knowing why. She understood his sense of discomfort and restraint when with his lady-love, if Kate O'Brien turned her scornful gaze upon him. In London Cyril might look as foolishly blissful as he

pleased; might rapturously assure Violet a dozen times a day, no man was ever more happy than himself, yet be safe from a quiet word or two, and covert smiles that though unmarked by Violet, who was often sunk in gentle abstraction, yet rankled afterwards in Cyril's mind like so many gibes and sneers.

Violet was very quiet indeed those weeks; she seemed lost in a dream. Often she asked herself, was this really she whose white satin gown was being pinned on and snipped out round the neck by the dressmaker; really the living, waking Violet Vyvian she had so long known—and who was now going to be married! She could not realise it.

Once only she roused, on hearing Margaret say, in a cheerful voice,

'I am writing to Jack, dear, to tell him all about it beforehand; the pink wedding, lawn-meet, and all. Have you anything to say to him?'

A knife seemed to go into poor Violet's heart.

'Had she anything to say?' Yes, truly; but what never must be said. *What* would she not have given to speak to Jack Ramsay just once, soul to soul; to tell him she had been honest towards him, to ask—had he been so by her, as his letter had brought her lately to believe, in spite of everything. That said, all righted between them, they must have parted again, but surely far more happily! How often the same thing happens in life, and how terribly hard it is to bear. We would give half the best remaining years of our lives to free ourselves in the eyes of the world, or of our superiors, maybe, from unjust blame, or the stigma of dishonour; ay, and even more, just to clear up to one we love some misunderstanding that has darkened two lives and may go down to the grave unexplained. And most likely those words never will be spoken on earth. Honour, or circumstances, forbids it. Violet roused herself now, therefore, and sent some vague praise of Harlequin, unable to bethink herself of anything better.

Just then Cyril entered, looking slightly flustered.

'Isn't it hard'! he complained. 'I am afraid I *must* go home on Friday, dear, as everything seems at a standstill for want of my instructions; and there is so little time before the wedding. But you can't get away, I fear, until Saturday.'

'No,' said Violet, with cheerful carelessness. 'Unless you like me to run the risk of a wrinkle somewhere in my wedding-gown; for it has to be tried on for the last time. I'll come, however, if you really wish it. But it is only the separation of one day.'

'No—no. I would not be so selfish,' answered Cyril hesitatingly, half ashamed of feeling so infatuated that he was loth to relinquish her society for even twenty-four hours. 'What can I do for you down there? Shall I go over on Saturday morning to Forde Manor and see the stables and kennels are all right?'

'Pray do; and please see poor Rufus too, he must be so dull, though he can just hobble

downstairs on two sticks,' said Violet, ever thoughtful of those sick or sorry. 'I am writing to Kate, so shall I say he may expect you?'

CHAPTER III.

KATE PLAYS HER TRUMP CARD.

But it was not Rufus O'Brien who awaited Cyril's visit on that Saturday morning.

Mrs. O'Brien herself stood, expectant, in the morning-room at Forde Manor, listening with eager ears for his footfall, her face pale with a resolute, strange light in her eyes.

'My chance has come at last!' she thought, triumphantly, yet feeling so nervous, so impatient that she could not sit down, but moved restlessly about the room. She had taken all precautions against the coming interview being interrupted; her husband was safe in his own study puzzling over accounts she had begged him

to look at, and the servants were busy. Cyril always came in this way from the terrace by the glass door, without troubling to ring. Two blinds were drawn down, so that he could not see her from outside, as she lay in wait. But what if he should not come at all! . . .

A step on the gravel outside. A rush of chill, spring, east wind as the glass door is opened, and Cyril Vyvian walks in with the brisk, bright air that shows small men of his height and sandy-haired, fair-complexioned appearance at their best.

The light died in his eyes, however, as he saw Kate; a change passed over his face; and he came forward slowly, framing some cold words of greeting. He met with a still more icy reception. Kate stood near the middle of the room, drawn up to her full, queenly height, watching him approach. She appeared not to notice the hand Cyril was about to offer her, so his dropped again.

'I came to see your husband this morning, Mrs. O'Brien,' said Vyvian, breaking first an

ominous silence, and bracing himself to endure what appeared likely to be an unpleasant meeting. Kate laughed harshly.

'I quite understand that. You did not expect to see me alone . . . most likely did not wish it. And yet, if you can go back a year or little more in your memory, you felt rather differently . . . my name was Kate, then, on your lips—that, or something still dearer.'

'What is the use of going back to those days now?'

Cyril looked her straight in the face, though troubled in his heart to know what was his opponent's intent.

'*You* did not really care for me. Thank God, I have long ceased to care for you! It is best so for both of us. And I am going to be married next week.'

'Don't be too sure of that, Cyril Vyvian.'

A few moments of silence followed, during which the two gazed at each other. Kate looked unflinching, full of pitiless, stern purpose; Cyril had turned pale at the suggestion, not

knowing what was coming, but fearful of the worst.

'What do you mean?' he said, hoarsely. 'Violet is truth and goodness itself. She has promised to be my wife; we have been engaged for months. And you would not . . . you could not interefere between us *now*.'

'I could! I would! Better late than never. I have never said a word yet against your engagement, because it seemed to me so utterly unlikely to become really a marriage. It was so prolonged, so needlessly secret that a hundred other causes might have intervened to break it off; and I believed, I hoped, something would, and that I might not have to be the one to do so. That is the reason of my long silence. Besides, anyone can see plainly Violet does not *really* love you! not with the best love a woman gives a man when she longs to be his, to be with him always. Ask yourself if she does . . .'

'Violet does not *really* love me!' repeated Cyril, vaguely, almost feebly, his face flushing. The accusation would not have stung him so to

the quick if in his heart he had not often feared it might be true. 'How can you say so?' Then suddenly flashing out: 'What do you want? What do you mean? *Why* do you wish to ruin my happiness? It is not as if you had ever loved me, that you should hate me now.'

'*Why* does not matter,' retorted Kate O'Brien, with a scornful smile. 'Believe if you like that I love you myself to distraction, or simply that I may not care to turn out of my comfortable quarters here, in order to see you installed as lord and master.'

'Upon my soul, I believe you are speaking the truth in your last words. Wicked selfishness, greed, those are your objects. Well, do your utmost. I know Violet better than you do, and nothing you can say would ever make her throw me over. Why should she?'

'Do you know her so well,' returned his tormentor, slowly. 'What do you think she will think of you, if she reads a certain letter of yours I have carefully kept? Do you know that she threw over another man, whom she loved

with her whole heart, because she believed him dishonourable; and, if so, how much more you——'

'I know she loved another man first. Respect her secrets, at least . . . Don't torture me! But *that letter!* surely you could not have kept *it!*'

And dim, haunting, but horrible recollections came back to Cyril of words that should never have been said or written, better had it been indeed if they never had been thought.

'I have kept it—safely! What will Violet think, I ask you again, when she reads it? She has engaged herself to you out of kind sisterly regard; and from pity of your poverty; and because, being so hampered in choice, she believes you honest, honourable, and upright. What will she feel when she learns that you tried to the uttermost to induce me to leave my husband—he, simple-minded man, being your best friend! and this under your cousin's very roof! . . . . you knowing all the while that Violet would have been outraged and shocked at such treach-

ery on your part had I consented to listen to your prayers? O! Violet is good and virtuous, but her very virtue makes a girl often pitiless. If she really loves with her whole heart, she may forgive a great injury, no doubt; but when her calm attachment is merely based on mistaken belief in a man's uprightness, and loyalty to his friends, and excellent principles which make him worthy of her innocence and utter trust in him—how then, Mr. Vyvian?'

'Woman!—Fiend!' burst out the wretched man. 'You could not do this thing—you dare not show her that letter. You tempted me on; you led me to the very brink, though you recoiled from the last leap, perhaps because I was too poor. Would you publish your own shame?'

'I mean to stop short at nothing. I will prevent this marriage—for Violet's own sake, if you like. You are not worthy of her,' uttered Kate, with panting breast and eyes that shot forth lightnings.

Cyril stopped short. With a groan he under-

stood the situation by a final sudden insight: that he was dealing with a passionate, reckless, and utterly selfish woman who, to gratify her covetousness and perhaps hurt vanity at his defection, would imperil her own reputation for the satisfaction of ruining his happiness, would little heed how she wounded herself if only she could kill her enemy. The drops stood on his face, which was very pale. He changed his tone now, and appealed in his misery, weakly, imploringly to her softer feelings, her compassion.

In vain! Kate hardened her heart all the more, and scoffed at his pitiful lover's complaints. In very truth she believed that Cyril's affection was as much for Violet's fortune as her person.

'*That* is something to grieve at losing, I own,' she remarked, in bitter jest. 'You see, on that point we fully agree—we both feel the same. One or other of us must lose the game, and it is worth playing for . . . . Don't think me unfeeling; it must be agonising, I admit, to see

your pleasant prospects of an easy life so utterly dashed. But you are a man! go out into the world and make yourself another fortune. I am only a woman, and can't work, worse luck.'

'Another fortune!' echoed Cyril, her taunts like so many poisoned arrows that all stuck in his flesh. 'I tell you, I love Violet. Do you think nothing of that?'

'Well!—not much,' jeered Kate slowly. 'You loved me to frenzy, you know, not so very long ago. Do you love her better now?'

'Yes! a hundred thousand times, yes,' shouted Cyril, goaded to madness by his enemy's sneering disbelief in his honesty of purpose. 'I should think *it is* a better love. What I felt then is not to be named in the same breath with what I feel now. Cannot you understand the immense difference? My God! she is like a saint to me; she would be my better self, while you—you——'

'You have said enough,' Kate interrupted, almost choking.

It was too much, indeed. Cyril had been hard upon her; she felt harder towards him, grimly determined that nothing should induce her to relent. Cyril saw his mistake, and with sinking heart tried to retrieve his false step; but it was too late.

'Then there is no hope for me? Nothing will induce you to change your mind?' said Vyvian at last, wearily. His sensitive nature was so keenly alive to the pain and disgust of having pleaded long and vainly that it revolted now. *Whatever happened, he would not stoop to entreat Kate any more.*

'Nothing!' returned Kate, briefly and emphatically.

'And what do you want me to do then?' asked Cyril, still speaking like a man in a dream.

'Write a letter to break off your marriage with Violet; and go off at once—go to-night—to Paris, or anywhere. You once left the country as suddenly on my account. You can do so on hers, now, that is all.'

'And if I refuse to do this?'

'Then I shall show that letter to-night to Violet. What is the use of going over old ground in this way? Come, Cyril Vyvian—I give you until this evening to make up your mind. There is no time to lose in preparing to go away to-night, you know.'

'Yes—in preparing to go away to-night,' repeated Cyril mechanically, in a dull voice.

'And you will send me a message? You will let me know what you have decided to do?'

'I will let you know.'

Vyvian took up his hat, stumbled slightly, caught at a table to support himself, and waited so a few seconds; then moved slowly out by the glass door.

'How quietly he takes it,' thought Mrs. O'Brien, watching; her own hot anger and the passionate revenge to which she had lashed herself beginning to subside.

As Cyril left the great house, he felt as if he should faint. By instinct, rather than conscious

volition, he chose the least frequented homeward way through the woods, to hide the agony he was suffering from the curious eyes of any passing fellow-creatures. Then the cold air somewhat revived him; presently the action of walking numbed his pain of mind. As he looked dully ahead, the trees on either side, the half-cleared copses piled here and there with faggots, seemed to pass by him as in a dream.

'Is life itself a dream;—and pain a dream?' he found himself thinking in a stupid way. He did not feel like a waking, living man as he went home, hopeless, joyless; rather he seemed a shadow moving through a world grown strange and cold.

Not two hours ago he had set out on his morning walk with elastic step and a buoyant heart, the fresh breeze deepening the ruddy hue in his face. Now, as pale, dispirited, and wearily-stricken he entered his old rusty gates and looked up the wind-blown avenue, where the ancient elms were decaying to their fall, and

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the Manor-house came in view, looking still more decayed, and, in spite of buttresses, slowly sinking by degrees back to that mother earth which had so long upborne it, a shudder ran through poor Vyvian.

He remembered his words to Violet at this very spot: 'I feel as if nearing my own grave.' What if they should come true?

Cyril went indoors on reaching the house, and locked himself into his study, a long dark room on the ground-floor, with a low ceiling crossed by black rafters. By-and-by his old housekeeper came with heavy steps and knocked at the door, asking would he have any luncheon.

She went away quite satisfied, when Cyril thanked her in muffled tones through the door aud said he wanted nothing. Mr. Vyvian often took no midday meal, she knew.

Could she have looked in, however, she would have seen her master seated with his head supported on his hands, trying to think . . . to think. Only a few hours' respite granted in which to face this awful blighting that had over-

cast with the swiftness and blackness of a thunder-storm the sunny sky of his prospects, so lately almost too dazzling with the glorious light of happiness.

There was no escape!

Either he must shatter with his own hand, at one blow, all the hopes of happiness he had so exultingly built up; himself refuse the cup of human bliss that was so near his lips. Or, if not——!

Oh, he could not do it! He *could not* bring himself to write with his own hand to Violet, saying that it was impossible for him to marry her. He to insult her thus! . . . and without any possible excuse to allege . . . not a word that his sick mind could devise to soften the great shock to her maidenly pride, she his star in life, his best beloved; and he who was her loyal slave, only too glad, too thankful for a little of the kindness that fell from her dear hands, for some of the love that filled her warm and gracious heart.

Should he dare Kate O'Brien to do her worst;

throw himself on Violet's mercy, and brave it out? But—*that letter!*

With a groan Cyril Vyvian knew in his heart Kate had spoken the truth. Violet would never forgive the revelation of his attempted treachery; never, never, at least, would she so far forgive as to marry him. If he had not been Rufus O'Brien's familiar friend, if he had not plotted under Violet's own roof, with her innocent eyes resting upon him, ignorant of the evil in his heart, full of trustfulness then, as now, of her cousin Cyril—her only living near relation, her almost brother as she used playfully to call him——!

Only now did the baseness of it all seem to become clear to the man who was so changed from the days of his mad passion, with its attendant perfidy, its deceits and disguises, the whole dishonourable conduct at remembrance of which his soul now sickened.

Truly his sin had found him out.

Rising, Vyvian moved restlessly up and down the room; he tried to think, but his brain was

overwhelmed by an awful weight of mind pressing upon it, like a sentence of doom. And slowly the hands of the old clock on the mantelpiece moved round, marking the flight of hours, and the afternoon sun emerged from the grey clouds that had hidden it all day and dropped westward, behind the great pine-trees, on the lawn, in a bar of orange glow.

At times a thought came he was no worse, after all, than other men; how many had done what he had only sought to do and now so keenly repented. Why should they flourish like green bay-trees, and his punishment be so terrible? Again came higher, holier whisperings. Why not bear his cross, take his sentence bravely, as a man should? But then the scandal of his flight . . . the thought of wandering far from home like a vagrant, for he could not return to the neighbourhood of Forde and give no reason for his shameful treatment of his cousin. Worse still than the public gossip and exile, he shuddered at thought of his past conduct in the eyes of her who should have been his wife. He

could not bear it . . . anything rather than to have her know, to sink in her esteem.

The sun fell lower behind the pine-trees.

The old housekeeper knocked again at the door. She had some tea ready and hot cake.

'Master Cyril, you would be the better of just a cup; it is all laid in the drawing-room. Please take it, sir, you had no lunch.'

'Presently,' answered her master's voice from within, sounding very quiet.

Could she have looked in, the good woman would have seen Vyvian, haggard and pale, standing by the table looking at an object that he had taken out of a drawer twice, and once put back. It tempted him so sorely; his fingers moved to close lingeringly upon it . . . peace, rest . . ! Violet would be driving homeward at this very minute; he breathed a prayer that every blessing in life might light upon her dear head.

The sun sank out of sight. There was a noise in the study that faintly reached the ears of the old couple of servants, man and wife, who were

sitting cosily at their evening tea near the kitchen fire.

'What was that?' said the housekeeper, listening a moment.

'Rats, most likely. How many of them there be in this old house, to be sure,' returned her husband, who was the gardener.

And both went on placidly enjoying their meal.

CHAPTER IV.

BY HIS OWN HAND.

'WELL! here I am,' cried Violet, entering the Forde hall with a sweet glow on her cheeks and divesting herself of her fur wraps as she cheerfully announced that obvious fact of her return home, which so many people uselessly do on similar occasions. 'Kate! what a colour you have; I never saw you looking better. Rufus, if you have not missed me since I have been away, I will never forgive you. But where is Cyril?'

The girl's eyes gave a glance round the comfortable big hall to its further shadowy recesses as she spoke; then she gave a little, half-surprised laugh.

'Not here! and he wired early this morning he would meet me at the station. This is wonderful! At least, he is quite sure to come for dinner; that is a certainty.'

In her heart, Mrs. O'Brien thought triumphantly it was not such a certainty, after all. She was secretly elated, but disposed to be very tender and affectionate towards Violet this evening, to console the girl beforehand for the shock and annoyance that she must soon experience. So when Violet, nestling presently into the softest depths of a great sofa near the fire, feeling as if anew all the luxury and comfort of her beautiful old home, exclaimed,

'It is really delightful to go to London for the pleasure of saying good-bye to hotel life at the end of it. To see one's own old family Gainsboroughs hanging up around one here, without having to stand and stare in a gallery till one gets a crick in one's neck, and to have one's own good servants again. There is no place like home, after all.'

'Quite true. There are few places like dear

old Forde,' said Kate, in her rich deep voice; then she rested her hand lovingly on her friend's arm in an unwonted caress, and added very earnestly, 'I trust, dear Violet, you may enjoy it more and more many years. It is not only a great pleasure to be rich, it is a power for good. I believe it is the duty of everyone for that reason to acquire as much money as they honestly can.'

Miss Vyvian did not make a direct answer. She wondered, with a laugh in her heart, how long Kate's preaching mood would last; and thought it irresistibly comic. With light-hearted eagerness she began describing all their late doings in London, her trousseau, the theatres and sights they had seen. Kate entered with zest into the latter accounts.

'Never mind about the clothes,' she said, contemptuously. 'In six or eight months they will all seem old-fashioned or frightful to your new ideas. But when you've been to a first-class opera, or had a good day at Sandown, and so forth, those are pleasures that last for life so long as you remember them.'

This again surprised Violet, to whom her new gowns were a particularly interesting detail of her wedding, although in general she was by no means absorbed in dress. Kate, on the contrary, loved the fashions.

Dinner-time arrived ; but not Cyril.

'What can be keeping him ?' exclaimed Violet, rather annoyed. Could he be careless—Cyril—of her return ?—neglect her ? It was extraordinary, but she did not like to show that she felt hurt.

'O, he is all right !' said Kate, carelessly. 'He came over this morning to see the kennels and stables, I believe ; then he just looked in and asked for Rufus, but when he heard you were at accounts, my good old man, he went away and would not disturb you.'

'Faith, he did well,' said Rufus. 'If I'd once risen from those sums, madam, you'd have found it difficult to coax me to them again. I'll tell you what it is, Violet, I'll bring in my saddle and put it on my chair another black day of arithmetic. It would come easier to tackle the

figures, I feel certain, if I could fancy myself across a good horse all the time, no matter if the country was stiffish.'

'Mr. Vyvian is always late, dear; and meantime we are all as hungry as hawks. Will you wait for him?' suggested Kate, deferentially.

'No; we need not wait for him,' decided Violet. But when they were half-way through the dinner, and that still the fourth seat was empty, she—well, almost felt a little cross with Cyril.

The old Manor was at such a short distance from Forde, after all; he might have sent a message over.

Rufus was just enjoying with gusto an especially savoury entrée, when Violet's old butler, looking particularly solemn, even pale, respectfully murmured that some one wished to see him at once on urgent business.

'At once! Does he know I'm at dinner? Who is the fellow?—what does he want?'

'I cannot exactly say, sir; but if you will only see him—he says it is an important message.

I believe—if you will excuse me, Mr. O'Brien, that you had *better* see him, please,' stammered the butler, in a whisper.

'What is the matter? Has anything gone wrong?' asked Violet, sharply, noticing her old servant's unusual manner.

'I cannot say, Miss Vyvian. A man wishes to see Mr. O'Brien on important business, I believe.' And the butler, stiffening his stout person to normal pomposity with effort, followed Rufus outside, who had regretfully laid down his knife and fork—but then started up as if his long limbs were pulled by wires, thinking to himself:

'Rabies in the kennels, as sure as a gun.'

In a few minutes—they seemed very long ones to Violet, who was unaccountably uneasy with a presentiment of trouble growing ever stronger on her; and to Kate also, though the latter was inclined to feel triumphant yet nervous—Rufus returned. He looked strange; so very grave, so slow in his step. As by magic, the footmen all disappeared from the room in the twinkling of

an eye, beckoned out by the butler. Violet noticed this at once.

'There is some bad news, Rufus,' she said, trying to steady her nerves. 'Tell it to me at once—say it out, please.'

'There is, dear. Cyril has been—not well all day, they are afraid. He——' Poor Rufus fairly stuck fast; something rose up in his throat he had to gulp hard at before his voice would come.

'He is very ill. Tell me the worst—I must go to him at once;' and Violet rose up pale but self-possessed.

Rufus put out his arm, as if barring her passage, instinctively.

'Not yet, Violet; don't hurry, my dear girl. It's worse, worse—and yet, maybe, better in God's infinite mercy, who knows?—than you think. O Lord help me! how can I tell her?'

'*He is dead, Rufus*,' said Violet, low and solemnly.

She knew it even before the honest fellow, with a nod of acquiescence, covered his face

with his hand and leant against the mantelpiece.

Neither of them noticed that Kate's face had grown of a still more deadly paleness than even Violet's, while her eyes were distended with horror; and that, standing in the background with both hands pressed on her breast, she was struggling hard to control herself.

'How was it—so—awfully sudden; was it—heart?' came from Violet's dry lips, with a stony calm.

'No. It was an accident—at least, it must have been. He was handling a revolver, cleaning it, maybe.'

A scream sounded in the room, but it did not come from Violet. Both the others started and looked round at Kate, whose face was ghastly; her bosom was heaving with such a terrible agitation they could see it rise and fall, as if, but for choking, fresh screams must have followed.

'Hush—hush!' exclaimed Rufus, with a warning authority in his voice, for he feared she was going into hysterics.

'Give her water,' Violet uttered at the same moment.

She it was who pushed her friend into a chair and held a glass to her lips. Though deadly white herself, and feeling her knees trembling and her strength almost failing her, yet the poor girl succeeded in keeping outwardly calm. Then after soothing Kate's first outburst by a few words, still more by her example (for the latter remembered wildly that she was on the verge of self-betrayal) Violet turned to Rufus, and entreated, low and hurriedly,

'Order the brougham round, please; tell them to be quick. I must go and see—him . . . You need not come, if you think that Kate—Is she well enough to be left?'

'Is it *not* go over with you? My poor Violet, my dear, brave girl, are we unfeeling brutes not to stand by you in such an hour? Of course we'll go!' returned Rufus, with solemn indignation and a world of pity in his blue eyes, laying a heavy friendly hand on Violet's shoulder and so escorting her to the door.

His heart was fairly melting with sorrow and sympathy; he did not know rightly how to show his feeling. When Kate looked at him in dumb beseeching he hardly noticed her expression, but told her peremptorily, though kindly, she must pull herself together and be ready to accompany Violet.

'You should see and help her if you can. What is this to us, after all—but it's nearly everything in life to her.'

What a terrible though short drive that was?

Violet shuddered as the carriage-lamps flashed on the rusty gates that led to the old manor avenue. She, too, remembered Cyril's prophecy. Alas, alas! how sad to think of the young, strong life that had so lately been the master-spirit within the mouldering walls of this old house, but that was now quenched like a lamp blown suddenly out.

Violet felt stunned. Intense pity for him overpowered her; poor, poor Cyril, who was so intensely happy in his engagement, in his blissful marriage future, as he had told her so few

days ago. She could not think of her own loss yet; or, if she did, it was only to ask herself, in heavy sadness,

'How soon shall I be taken too, I wonder?'

Death seemed so strange, such an awful, sudden mystery. It was to her as if they had all been sitting in a happy circle in the same room they were all their lives accustomed to inhabit, when an unseen shape came and beckoned Cyril out of their midst, and, without a word of farewell, he had gone out and closed the door—and that was all. Till they who stayed behind were also called in solemn turn, they would never see him again. And *it* had happened so short a time ago!

'Where is he at this instant, I wonder?' she thought to herself, looking out at a star shining softly afar in the night-sky.

They led her quietly in, with cautious footfall and hushed, awed voices (as if he who lay within could hear), to the death-chamber.

Cyril's body was still left in the study, but it had been lifted, and laid upon a well-worn, leather-

covered sofa, from which a litter of magazines and newspapers were first hastily cleared away. He wore his ordinary shooting-suit, as if just come in from a walk. His face, but for its pallor, might have seemed sleeping, its expression was so calm, almost smiling. Only, on looking closer, a small bluish hole was visible close to the right temple.

Violet had gone straight forward, and stood looking down at the prostrate dead body of her promised husband. She did not know what was going on behind her; she saw nothing, heard nothing. But Kate O'Brien, after crossing the threshold of the house with faltering step, had stopped at the study-door and leant feebly against the wall for support, seeing a glimpse of the recumbent figure in yonder, with a handkerchief spread over its features, which the old housekeeper gently removed as Violet approached.

'I can't go in. I can't—Rufus,' she gasped, with failing breath. 'I could not bear to see his face.'

'I won't force you; but for pity's sake be brave, Kate, and think of being a friend and support now to poor Violet, and not of your own fright. If *she* can bear to go in there, surely you might,' whispered back Rufus, pained and ashamed that his wife should so fail in what he thought her plain duty. There was only one light in the dark hall, and it happened to shine upon his face, which though unbeautiful in itself seemed to Kate like that of an accusing angel, it was so sternly earnest, while his blue eyes shone with a solemn pity. She dared not risk falling in her husband's esteem; under his glance she *must* go forward.

One look at poor Cyril Vyvian's face, and a few seconds later Kate without more ado sank fainting where she stood. But, fortunately, Rufus was standing beside her, and saw her figure sway. He was just in time to catch her before she fell, and made two or three silent strides with his burden to the hall outside.

Violet became dimly aware, despite the deadening oppression of her thoughts, and the

weakness, almost paralysed state of her senses from the recent shock, that something disturbing was passing in the twilight group behind her at the door. A smothered exclamation of pity, a sob or two from the old servants jarred upon her. She did not know aught else had happened.

'Leave me alone a few minutes, please,' she said, hardly turning her head, and standing there 'like a statue,' as they said afterwards. So they left her alone, with poor Cyril Vyvian's dead body.

Violet bent and solemnly kissed his forehead, the cold touch of which brought a sudden gush of tears to her eyes that strangely relieved her. Then she sank on her knees by the dead man's side and sought comfort in prayer.

As the girl knelt there, a strange rush of thoughts swept through her mind. Oh! if only she could have loved poor Cyril better whilst he was still alive! She almost blamed herself, as if somehow the fault had lain with her. True, he said to her he had been utterly happy, had seemed

transported to a seventh heaven of bliss, indeed. And yet Violet had a curious feeling as if he had been cheated of the full, brimming measure of love that it is in the power of most women to bestow on the one human being dearest to them; that she had not been able to bring—to him. Yet she had honestly tried her best. By degrees consolation stole into her mind; her grief and pity for Cyril, that were wild at first (grief that his young life should be so early cut off and baulked of its promised earthly happiness, which overpowered her own sense of loss), gradually became subdued.

She rose calmed, presently, though with a widowed feeling that the man who had truly loved her—the only one who seemed destined by fate a partner for life—was taken away; and that henceforth she would be lonely indeed.

Violet's eyes wandered round the study next, with reverence but an intensified keenness to notice its smallest details. A wish had risen in her mind to picture the scene of but three short hours ago, when Cyril must have been standing

there looking round on just the same objects—full of life and vigorous health.

Suddenly her glance, straying to the writing-table in the bay-window ending the study, fell upon a letter that seemed begun and left unfinished in an open blotting-book. A pen still lay beside it, but the blotting-case itself had been evidently pushed hastily away.

Impelled by a sudden wish to know what this letter might be, which was among poor Cyril's last occupations, and that no one but herself had noticed, Violet gently took it up. Then she started, and a violent tremor ran through her frame.

The letter was dated that very afternoon, and bore these words:

'DEAREST VIOLET,

'Forgive me if you can——'

There the writer's effort had plainly broken down.

A horrible conviction stole into Violet's mind. She moved slowly back, and gazed with ineffa-

ble sorrow and pity at the dead, still face on the sofa.

'O, Cyril, Cyril! *why* did you do it?' she whispered aloud, as if those lips might yet unclose and tell their secret. But there was no voice, nor any that answered.

CHAPTER V.

THE MIGHTY BOAR.

In the meantime, Jack Ramsay, who had now been some time in India, had thrown himself *con amore* into the wild sports of the East. He had of course joined the local pig-sticking club, and had got together a good stud of hunters—Arabs and Walers, off whose backs he had already gained many a first spear.

At times, however, he constantly found his thoughts straying back to the 'girl he had left behind him,' and he thought bitterly of what might have been! Then again his mind reverted to the memory of his dear dead mother, and how *she* would wish him to bear the trouble

laid upon him—to be brave and chivalrous even in thought, towards the woman who had done him, as he fancied, this grievous wrong—and above all, *to trust.*

Ramsay was what so few calling themselves Christians really are. He was conscious (as who among us is not !) that he had numerous faults and failings, nay, even sins, and these he did his best to subdue and overcome; but his faith was simple and childlike, and he trusted implicitly in the all-knowing goodness and mercy of Him who guides our destinies, trying to the utmost of his weak human power to follow the example of the great Founder of our religion, and forgive even as he would be forgiven; and who shall say that with all his faults Jack Ramsay was not in truth nearer the type of a true Christian gentleman, than the man who is ever introducing religion, and God's name, into every phase and occurrence of daily life, and who is yet probably at heart a mere hypocritical sinner like the Pharisee of old?

Jack proved as popular among his brother-officers in India as he had been at home, and all he came in contact with at the station of Shikarabad vowed he was the best fellow out. He entered with zest into all the amusements of the station. Were theatricals to be got up, Jack was besought to take the leading part. It was the same at polo, racquets, gymkhana sports, pig-sticking, &c., to all of which his cheery presence and proficiency seemed to impart new life; and what perhaps made him more a favourite than anything else was his entire absence of jealousy, and his ever willingness to allow a younger and less experienced man than himself to reap, in the shape of trophies, those rewards of success so dear to the sportsman's heart.

The periodical letters he had received from Margaret Beaumont had contained no inkling of Violet's engagement to Cyril; and those rare ones he also got from old Squire Bentley were principally devoted to an account of the wonderful sport the Marshwood Vale Hounds had been enjoying, with just an incidental allusion now

and then to Violet's performances on Harlequin. He had, therefore, to be content with such scant scraps of news of the being he still loved best on earth as these letters contained, and to cherish the hope that some day, perhaps, the cloud might lift, and the happiness that he longed for might be granted him. He was, alas! destined soon to be roughly awakened from these dreams.

There was to be a ten days' pig-sticking meet, to which some members of a crack Hunt in the next Presidency had been invited, and the Shikarabad Hunt men looked to Ramsay to uphold the honour of their side. It was a glorious morning in December, that pleasantest month of the year in the burning plains of the sunny land of Ind. Under a tope, or grove, of giant mango-trees might be seen quite a little village of tents grouped round a larger one, which formed the mess-tent and from the pole of which fluttered a little white pennon bearing the device worked in red of a boar's

head with crossed spears, the badge of the Shikarabad Hunt club. The grove on one side was bounded by a large tank, with a flight of massive masonry steps leading down to its margin, a remnant of some of the great irrigation works made by the Mahomedan conquerors of the land in the seventeenth century; whilst beyond lay a range of rocky hills bathed in the purple shadow of distance.

Numerous horses were picketed about; some undergoing a thorough dressing over by their attendant syces, or grooms, whilst their noses were deeply embedded in their grain-bags. Here and there, sportsmen might be seen strolling about, cheroot or pipe in mouth, feeling a doubtful foreleg, or else perhaps administering a sharp reproof to some careless groom. At the back of the mess-tent a thin curl of blue smoke arose, denoting that breakfast was in course of preparation.

Presently a horseman cantered up, and, as he threw himself from his smoking hack, was greeted with a volley of welcome.

'Hooray! here he is at last.'

'Why, Ramsay, I thought you were never going to turn up.'

'Now, old chap, we'll have breakfast; here, khansama, hazari lao; (butler, bring breakfast.)'

'I'm very sorry to have kept you fellows waiting,' returned Jack, for it was our hero, 'but I couldn't help it. Just as I was starting, I got a most urgent note from old Colonel Currie's wife, begging and imploring me to come over and see her about her little dear Fido. Of course I had to go, only to find she had been stuffing the little cur, who was simply suffering from overfeeding; so I took him back and told my dog-boy to give him nothing to eat, and to run him round the compound for four hours a day! However, now I'm here, let's have something to eat, for I'm as hungry as a hunter, and so thirsty that I could drink a bucket dry.'

Breakfast being discussed, beaters all counted and presented with check tickets, our sportsmen mounted, and accompanied by their second

horses, and syces carrying spare spears, a start was made for the first covert to be beaten. This consisted of a stretch of rumnah grass, clothing both sides of a wide ravine, along the bottom of which densely growing sindee bushes (a species of prickly palm) afforded a pleasant retreat for the porcine tribe. At certain points men with little red flags were posted in trees, and it was their duty to signal with these the direction the hog broke. The party numbered some dozen sportsmen, most of them bent on riding, and contesting for the honour of 'first spear.'

Soon the beat began with a most infernal din—tomtoms, horns, rattles, and all manner of native music, added to the shouts from some two-score dusky throats, combined to make such a pandemonium of noise that a sounder of hog soon broke, and, being allowed plenty of law, the word was then given by the captain of the Hunt to 'Ride!'

Away our sportsmen all thundered in hot pursuit, each group of three or four selecting a rideable

boar. Two or three were soon accounted for; Ramsay getting one first spear and one of the visitors the other. Another small covert was then beaten blank, and then came the *pièce-de-resistance* of the day: a dense baubul thorn covert with a thick undergrowth of grass, which was known to hold a heavy boar.

On their way to beat this, Ramsay saw a young subaltern named Douglas, belonging to an infantry regiment quartered at Shikarabad—a keen sportsman, but, alas! like many another subaltern, suffering from impecuniosity, and therefore only able to afford one horse—walking along disconsolately, leading his animal which was decidedly lame.

'Hulloa! Douglas, what is the matter?' said he pleasantly.

'Oh! just my infernal luck!' was the reply. 'I thought I'd be very sharp and get a spear all to myself, so followed what I took to be a good boar, then just as I was going to spear found it was a sow; but I was going too fast to

pull up, and old Solomon blundered into a beastly grass-covered nullah with me, and I am afraid he's no more good this trip. It's a confounded nuisance! I did hope to score a spear against those Bombay swells and have a shy at this old dant-wallah* you are going to beat for; but I suppose I'll have to do "patience on a monument," or rather up in a tree, while you fellows are having all the fun;' and the poor boy's face fell ruefully.

'No need of you doing that,' returned Jack, 'I'll lend you a horse; you shall ride my nag, old Twilight, and if you don't get the spear off *him*, you deserve to be shot,' he added, laughing.

'No, no, my dear fellow, I wouldn't for the world. I know you've been keeping him for this run; and, besides, I'd be sure to make a mess of it and lose the spear.'

'Nonsense; you do as I tell you, or else I'll never speak to you again.'

* 'Tusker.'

A little more pressing on Jack's part, and young Douglas was mounted on Twilight, a high-caste, grey Arab, and veteran hog-hunter, whilst his own lame horse was sent back to camp.

It is no slight exercise of self-denial to mount a friend on your best horse at any time, but given the probability of a really good run—with the prospect of a fight at the end of it—the sacrifice becomes far greater, and involves a certain amount of self-abnegation that even the most generous of sportsmen could hardly be blamed for declining.

Ramsay, however, was one of those happy natures ever ready to do another a good turn without counting the cost. He knew young Douglas was 'as keen as mustard,' and pitied the lad for the disappointment he was suffering; and so, out of pure kindliness of heart, put himself entirely on one side—though he had been expressly keeping Twilight for this very run—and contented himself with riding another of his stud, a slower and inferior animal.

At the first shout of the beaters the 'dant-wallah' in question, a whacking boar, broke, and, after a preliminary look round to see that the coast was clear, set off at a leisurely trot. The hunters were concealed behind a clump of trees, seeing but unseen by the boar; and each one of the party, among whom were many veteran hog-hunters, could almost hear their hearts beat as they viewed his gigantic proportions and noted the gleam of his large, white tushes.

'There he goes!' whispered young Douglas, involuntarily tightening his rein, and settling himself in his saddle, preparatory to a start—a proceeding which made Twilight reach at his bridle and paw the ground impatiently.

'Steady, lad, steady!' replied Jack, with a quiet smile, 'we must let him get well away first, and then it will be your own fault if you don't get the spear.'

At last the boar was fairly off, and the word 'Ride!' was lowly spoken by the captain of the hunt. At the mandate the whole party dashed

out from behind their place of concealment, and burst like a torrent over the plain at the very top of their speed.

The boar seemed now alive to a sense of his danger, and laid himself out to gain the shelter of a thick belt of jungle some two miles distant. Away the party scoured; the hard-baked earth ringing with the strokes of their horses' hoofs, and the dust rising in clouds behind them. Two of the visitors were leading, then came Jack with Douglas, whose somewhat unpractised hands were fretting the old horse Twilight, for he was boring and shaking his head in his impatience to go to the front. A nullah or dry water-course, with rotten banks and a bottom of sheet rock, now confronted them. In and out went the boar, closely followed by the three leading sportsmen.

Twilight could stand the restraint no longer, and, seizing the bit between his teeth, went at the yawning chasm forty miles an hour, cleared it with a mighty bound, and was off again in his stride in a moment, whereby he gained

considerably on the other competitors in the race.

On they sped for another mile; but, as the leading man was preparing to close, the boar jinked sharply to the right and was away at a tangent in an instant. Twilight, who was now lying second, was up to this game, and turned almost as quickly as the boar, thus giving young Douglas the lead. Only the four were now really in it, or had a chance of the spear—Douglas, Ramsay, and two of the visitors.

As they traversed a terribly rough piece of stony ground, covered with cracks, holes, and stubs, the race became keenly exciting. Spurs were clashing as each man leant forward with spear extended, trying to get every ounce out of the game horse he bestrode. Now one, now another gained a temporary advantage, as their horses strained every nerve and muscle in the race, and were almost reeling from the exertion. A few hundred yards, and the issue lay plainly between young Douglas and one of the visitors.

Half-mad with excitement, not two spears'-lengths from the boar—who was beginning to show signs of exhaustion, as he champed his tusks, from which the foam-flakes were flying, and looked back viciously with his little brown eyes—young Douglas gave Twilight two sharp digs with his spurs, which the old horse answered gamely, though with a groan. Another stride and the spear was almost won when, with a surly 'woof, woof!' the boar charged swiftly round. Douglas had only time to put down his spear, and the next moment he was sent flying over Twilight's head as the horse turned a complete somersault, and then lay motionless. It was the gallant boar's last effort, however, and the spear had sped true, for, after staggering on some fifty yards, he rolled over and died with a surly grunt of defiance; in fact, only as an Indian boar—that pluckiest of all beasts of the chase—can die. Young Douglas was on his feet in an instant; and, as he saw the boar roll over, uttered a loud and triumphant 'whoo-whoop!'

'Come, old man, get up,' he said, turning to Twilight, who did not move, however. Just then Jack pulled up.

'What's the matter, Douglas; not hurt, I hope,' he said; 'I must congratulate you on getting the spear.'

'No, I'm all right, thanks, old man, but I fancy Twilight is pumped; he won't get up.'

Jack was off his horse in a moment; then one glance was sufficient.

'He'll *never* get up any more, Douglas. Look there;' and he pointed to a long gash behind the girths, from which the unfortunate horse's vitals were protruding.

The boar had not died unavenged; for, as he passed beneath the horse, he had given him that ghastly wound with a lightning-like stroke of his ivory-white tushes. Besides this, poor Twilight had broken his neck in the fall, and had been put out of his misery in a moment; but it was a moment of triumph—a glorious death, in the hour of victory. As Jack gazed at his dead horse, where it lay with glazed eyes

and stiffening limbs, he could not help a tear stealing down his cheek at the loss of his good steed, one he had got to love and value much, as what sportsman does not that truest friend—a good horse.

Poor young Douglas, when he realized the true state of affairs, and that, owing to Jack's kindness and generosity, he had lost his best horse, sat down and fairly cried like a child.

'Oh! you can never forgive me, Ramsay!—wh-a-at an—an infernal f-f-ool I was to ride him so hard,' he sobbed.

In a moment Jack's own trouble vanished before another's sorrow, as, laying his hand gently on the lad's shoulder, he said, kindly,

'Never mind, Douglas, it can't be helped—you were in no way to blame. I'm only glad to think you were not hurt, and that you have upheld the honour of the Hunt. Besides,' he added, 'I couldn't have wished for a more honourable death for the dear old horse.'

'Oh! I would give all I possess had this not happened; I *can't* keep those tushes, Ramsay, I can't, indeed, they would always remind me of this wretched day and what a cursed fool I am,' faltered the poor boy.

'Well, we won't talk about that now; let us get back to camp,' returned Jack, leading the way.

He was in no mood for moralizing or indulging in vain regrets which could do no good, and would only deepen the youngster's misery.

A couple of hours later the whole party, augmented by the presence of a subaltern in Jack's battery named Byng, were assembled at dinner round the mess-table. The events of the day were of course the engrossing topics of conversation, and naturally turned on the big boar and the death of poor Twilight. Jack came in for much commiseration; but, knowing what a sore subject it must prove for young Douglas, he turned the conversation.

'I wonder what sport fellows are having at

home,' he remarked. 'I hear scent has been wonderfully good.'

'Yes,' replied Byng, 'I believe it has been a wonderful season; and by-the-by, Jack, that reminds me, weren't you hunting down with the Marshwood Vale Hounds last year?'

'Yes,—why?' was the reply.

'Then I suppose you knew the sporting young woman who is their M.F.H.?'

'Of course I did;' and Jack felt the hot blood surging to his temples at the very thought of Violet.

'Well, then perhaps it will interest you to know she is going to be married. I heard so from my sister who lives down in those parts, and, woman-like, she thinks all such gossip supremely interesting.'

Going to be married! Jack could hardly believe his senses. The shock almost made him reel. Then a flood of bitterness rushed over him, and he smiled grimly as he queried, with an air of apparent unconcern that he was far from feeling,

'Really; and who is the lucky man?'

'A cousin of hers, I believe; but I can't remember his name. Stuck up for her at a row during the election, or something of that sort, and so won the young lady's heart, and, what's more to the purpose, her hand, for I believe she is a deuce of an heiress.'

These last words were as gall and wormwood to Jack, but he was too much a man of the world to betray his feelings; and, merely remarking that he was very tired, left the party, who had now adjourned to the cheerful proximity of a roaring camp-fire outside, and sought the privacy of his own tent. His emotions were conflicting. This day he had had two hard and bitter strokes: the loss of, first, the woman he loved best, and the death of his horse a tried and trusty comrade. Few, except those whose lot it has been to endure bitter disappointment, can realize what he felt; and is it to be wondered at that during the long hours of night, though he wrestled hard with his feelings, he could not avoid experiencing a certain sense

of deep bitterness and disappointment, and being shaken in his belief of women? Daylight, however, found him calmer; he saw it was useless to repine, and resolved to face his trouble in a manly way. But he had no heart left for the sport that a few hours previously had possessed such attractions for him, and, to the surprise of everyone at breakfast, expressed his intention of returning to cantonments. Arrived there, he found a long letter from Margaret Beaumont, giving him full details of Violet's engagement to Cyril, and concluding in these terms:

'I will not conceal from you, dear Jack, that at one time I had hoped things might have turned out very differently; and that though Violet might have been lost to us here as mistress of Forde Manor, yet that she and another person, who is like herself very dear to me, would have been happy together. But what *is*, I believe, must be ultimately for the best.

Certainly she has a heavy stewardship here, in the management of her estate, and the care of the many dependent upon her, who would sorely miss one so kind and considerate. Cyril Vyvian is at all events kindly and pleasant, and this marriage was her dead father's wish; so with all my heart I trust it will turn out well. You yourself, my dear boy, if even you should feel some disappointment at this news, will, I am sure, put your own feelings on one side, and congratulate both Violet and Cyril on their engagement.'

To this letter Ramsay replied in suitable terms; for, fond though he was of Mrs. Beaumont, he was far too reserved by nature to indicate, even to her, all he felt. Whilst Violet was yet unmarried, he had still thought there was some chance for him, and he had lived in hopes that one day, perhaps, an opportunity of asking her for an explanation might have been afforded him; but now—ah! that chance could never

come, and every feeling of honour and chivalry must henceforth seal his lips. Still with God's help he would try to bear up, though all that made life worth living for seemed now gone.

'I promised to be her friend,' he told himself, 'and, by Jove! hard though it is, I will endeavour to prove myself such in the truest sense, and she shall never guess what anguish this news has cost me.'

And so he wrote her a few lines of congratulation, sending her at the same time, as a wedding-present, handsomely mounted in gold, the tushes of the big boar that had caused poor Twilight's death, and concluded by saying,

'I send you a pair of exceptionally fine boar's tushes. I trust they will possess some value in your eyes, as they cost me the life of the best horse I ever owned, bar dear old Harlequin. I offer them to you, because I prize them highly, and I trust, therefore, that for that reason they

may prove the most acceptable gift I can lay at your feet. Will you, in the future, let me be what you once promised I should, and allow me not only to sign myself but always to remain

'Your true and devoted friend,

'JACK RAMSAY.'

CHAPTER VI.

IN THE JAWS OF DEATH.

It required no small effort on Ramsay's part to write to Violet Vyvian in the terms he did. His first impulse was to pour out the whole bitterness of spirit that he felt in a torrent of reproach; but better, kindlier, and more manly thoughts prevailed. He told himself that he had played his game fairly and lost, and so must grin and bear it. What was the use of repining for what now could never be his? No, every dictate of true, honourable, and chivalrous feeling pointed out the right course for him to pursue, and he determined henceforth to follow it and be loyal not only to the woman he had loved with all

the strength his heart was capable of, but to the man who had supplanted him in her affections. It must not be conjectured that Jack arrived at this decision easily or without many a bitter struggle against his inward man; for who among us that gains the mastery over *self* has not to fight hard for it? He felt, however, that cantonment life was now distasteful to him, and that he *must* get away—seek fresh fields and pastures new—and in some form of keen excitement strive to forget the past. He thought over many plans, but all were rejected except two. He was undecided where he should spend the two months' leave he had obtained. Should he go to the far away, and but little known regions of Thibet, and there, in that land of lonely barren mountains and desolation, seek relief in pursuing the yak, or wild ox, and the ovis ammon? or should he devote it to the pursuit of tigers, bison, and other dangerous game in the more adjacent jungles of the Central Provinces?

He was sitting one day in his bungalow

ruminating as to which route he should follow, when young Douglas came in.

'Ah! Douglas, how are you? glad to see you! Why, we haven't met for an age!' he exclaimed, rising and greeting the young fellow cordially.

'No,' was the reply, 'to tell the truth, Ramsay, I've been ashamed to come and see you since—since—' and Douglas hesitated, and looked at where a water-colour sketch of Twilight hung on the wall.

'O, bosh! don't talk like that,' returned Jack, divining his thoughts, '*that* is all over, and mind, if you and I are to be friends, I won't have any more of your apologies about an accident that you couldn't help. Come, light your pipe! Sit down—have a chat, and assist me to solve a difficult problem.'

'That is just what I came to ask you to help me with,' smiled Douglas. 'The fact of the matter is, I'm dying to have a shot at a tiger. I can't join any of the parties going out this hot weather: first, because they wouldn't take such

an inexperienced duffer as myself, and secondly, because I can't afford the expense; but I've got my leave, and I mean to rough it, and try to bag a tiger by myself. I thought you might perhaps be able to give me a hint where to go. I do want a tiger-skin of my own shooting awfully.'

'And why are you so keen about a tiger-skin, may I ask?' queried Jack, laughing, noticing the way the lad blushed when he concluded his sentence.

'Well, Ramsay,' hesitated Douglas, 'it is no good beating about the bush, so I may as well tell you. I'm awfully spoony on a girl at home—such a jolly girl, the dearest little thing in the world—such lovely hair and eyes and such a ripping——'

'Come, come, I can't stand the full description of your lady-love's charms,' laughed Jack; then he added more seriously, and with just a tinge of bitterness in his tone, 'So you've got hit 'twixt wind and water, my lad. Don't be an ass; few women are worth risking your life for,

as you certainly would if you tried conclusions with a tiger single-handed; but still I think I can help you.'

'O! I don't see any great risk in it,' argued the youngster. 'I've heard all you have to do is to sit up in a tree and pot the tiger as he comes along.'

'And suppose you wound him, as ten to one you only would, what would your sagacity do then? for, remember, you could not leave the wounded brute behind you to play the mischief all round.'

This contingency had certainly not crossed the young man's mind, for his face fell as he replied, slowly,

'Well—I hardly know, but I suppose I should have to take my chance and follow him up.'

'Yes,' returned Jack, 'that you certainly would have to do; and therefore I say that tiger-shooting alone, and on foot, is hardly worth the risk that it entails; but I quite appreciate your feelings, Douglas, and will do my best to assist

you to obtain the skin for your ladye-fair, if you will adopt my proposal, and not let any silly feelings of pride debar you from doing so. Now I am not a swaggering idiot, but I know I am a little more blessed with this world's goods than you are, and consequently can afford what you can't; so listen to me. When you came in, I was just meditating a hot-weather trip myself, and intended asking you and Byng to join me. I know a good line of country, and have heard of a first-rate shikari who was out there two years ago with a friend of mine. Now, if you like to come, you need only pay what you can afford towards the expenses, and I'll stand the rest for the pleasure of your company. Come, say, is it a bargain?'

This proposal fairly staggered young Douglas, and he hardly knew what to say. He was keenly anxious to go, yet did not like to avail himself of Ramsay's generosity, and therefore began to frame excuses.

A little argument on Jack's part, however,

prevailed at last, and it was eventually settled that he was to join Ramsay and Byng in the proposed trip. So the young fellow went away jubilant, more convinced than ever that Jack Ramsay was 'the best fellow under the sun.'

The next few weeks were spent in a state of feverish excitement, making preparations. Stores had to be laid in, cartridges loaded, pack-bullocks and drivers engaged, tents overhauled, and all the hundred-and-one necessary arrangements made for a two months' residence in the heart of the jungles where they would be far from all civilization. All this took time, and gave them more work than anyone not acquainted with all the preparations for a successful and comfortable trip of this kind can imagine.

At last the long-looked-for day arrived, and early one morning the three sportsmen mounted their hacks, and cantered out of cantonments on their way to their first camp, some forty miles distant. Having horses posted half-way, they

reached their destination about midday, to find their tents pitched under a tope of giant mango-trees, and a comfortable meal awaiting them. The 'khubber' or news given them on their arrival, by Hyder Khan their shikari, was eminently satisfactory. Two tigers had been marked down in one place, three in another, and so on; whilst the reports of panthers and bears 'only waiting to eat their lordships bullets,' conveyed in the flowery language of the East, was such as to whet the keen appetites of all the party for sport. Amongst the tigers was a notorious man-eater, and at dinner that night the mode of dealing with this redoubtable animal was discussed by all the party.

For the sake of coolness, the sportsmen had their beds placed out in the open, at night, and Jack as he lay looking up at the moon glinting down through the dense foliage of the smooth shiny mango leaves, then lighting up their massive trunks and anon throwing flickering dancing shadows on the ground, as the night-breeze gently stirred the tree-tops, could not

help his thoughts straying far away to merry England, and picturing to himself how the selfsame moon would be shedding its beams among the glades and oak woods of Forde Manor.

'What an ass I am!' he mentally ejaculated. 'Why, it's broad daylight there now.'

The occasional neigh of a horse, the subdued conversation of the servants, as they huddled round the camp-fire, smoking the everlasting hubble-bubble, and the snores of his companions soon recalled him to a sense of his whereabouts, and with a sigh he turned over and endeavoured to sleep. This, however, was long in coming, and Ramsay felt a strange presentiment of evil, which required much strength of mind to overcome.

Some three weeks had passed, and the party had enjoyed a fair amount of sport, having during that time bagged some five tigers, two bears, a panther, besides a few bison and deer of different kinds.

Young Douglas, however, had not yet had

his wish gratified of shooting a tiger, or participating in a really good 'scuffle,' as he termed it, with the monarch of the jungle, all the tigers bagged having fallen easy victims to Ramsay and Byng, and showing no fight.

At last the camp was pitched at a village called Dolara, noted as the haunt of the man-eating tiger before alluded to. The 'khubber' anent this feline scourge was highly satisfactory (from the sportsmen's point of view), as locating the animal, for he was said to have killed a wood-cutter some five miles from their camp only a few days previously, and Hyder Khan reported having tracked him in the sandy bed of an adjacent river.

'Well,' said young Douglas, 'I hope we are in for a good thing at last, and that this brute will show fight if we turn him up.'

'Yes,' returned Byng, 'so far I must confess our sport has been mild as to quality, though, as far as quantity goes, we cannot complain.'

'Don't you fellows be too anxious for a

"scuffle,"' observed Jack, quietly; 'remember, we are all of us comparative novices at this sort of work, and haven't yet faced an angry and savage tiger. It is not all child's play, and it would be no joke if one of us got mauled. Somehow, I fancy this brute will leave his mark on some of us, before we have done with him.'

'Come! don't croak, Jack,' laughed Byng, 'we are all pals, and mean to stick to each other, and it will be a deuced clever tiger who will make his charge good against our six barrels.'

'Well, I only hope so,' replied Jack, 'and may we be all sound in skin and limb this time to-morrow night.'

The next morning the camp presented a busy and animated scene. Beaters kept arriving from all parts, willing to lend their humble aid to the sahibs who were to rid them of the feline pest whose body had been nourished by their friends and relations. Hyder Khan was bustling about giving emphatic instructions to several of the most intelligent villagers, some of

whom were to be placed as 'stops,' whilst others were to be posted in trees as 'look-out' men. Byng was superintending the distribution of check tickets, whilst Douglas and Ramsay were finishing the careful loading of cartridges. Each felt the responsibility of the task before them, and deemed it necessary to take every precaution to ensure success. At last all arrangements were completed, and the party set out.

A walk of some two miles brought them to the ground it was intended to beat, which was the dry bed of a river thickly overgrown with a dense thicket of jow, or scrub cypress, and long grass. Here and there great boulders of smooth rock cropped up in masses, forming a cool and tempting retreat to a repose-loving tiger. At a certain spot, the river, reduced by the hot weather, narrowed considerably and flowed through a channel only a few yards wide. Near this the remains of a half-eaten bullock were discovered, and, as the cover soon ended, it was conjectured the tiger was lying

close by. It was therefore determined that the three sportsmen, accompanied by Hyder Khan and their gun-bearers, should move quietly ahead to post themselves, looking up any likely spots on the way.

They were proceeding to do this when the tiger bounced up with an indignant roar. He was immediately saluted with a volley which only seemed to accelerate his pace. As he galloped over a bit of open ground, several more shots were fired, but only the last (fired by young Douglas), as he was entering the next patch of covert, could be recorded as a hit. A 'look-out' man on the opposite bank then signalled he had marked the tiger down into a small patch of jow that was formed into a miniature island by the shallow stream encircling it. Above this, the bank of the river, thickly clothed with brushwood and boulders of rock, rose abruptly. Taking a few beaters with them, the sportsmen made a détour, and gained the top of this bank, making the coolies throw stones into the covert over their heads.

This roused the tiger, but he managed to slip away unseen owing to the thick covert, and gain the shelter of the little island into which he was marked, and from this stronghold neither sticks nor stones, shots nor shouts, could rouse him.

'I tell you what,' said Ramsay, 'the only thing to do is for one of us to get into that little boat I see yonder, and paddle past the island, firing broadsides into it whilst the other two remain on the top of the bank on the chance of a snap shot.'

'All right,' replied young Douglas, ever keen to be in front where there was any danger to be encountered. 'I'll go.'

'No, no,' returned Jack, 'I won't have you go. I as senior claim to lead that part of the attack;' and he smiled, though with a look of quiet resolve in his keen eyes. Afterwards Byng and Douglas both recalled that look of calm determination.

This manœuvre, however, was comparatively unsuccessful. It roused the tiger truly, but he

dashed across the small intervening space of open ground with such rapidity that he only afforded Byng and Douglas snap shots which did not hit, and regained his former retreat on the bank. The party then tried to induce the brute to appear from below, but, this attempt likewise ending in failure, the original plan of attacking him above was again resorted to.

'I see nothing for it,' observed Ramsay, 'but for us to walk the brute up. We can't leave him behind us wounded, and he seems disinclined to show; what say you, Byng?'

'O! I'm game,' was the reply.

'So am I,' put in Douglas. 'Hoorah! we'll have a real good scuffle at last.'

Forming up abreast, with Hyder Khan and the beaters covering their advance from above, the three advanced slowly down-hill through the thick brushwood, keeping a sharp look-out, and with fingers on the triggers of their rifles. Ramsay was on the right, Byng on the left, and Douglas in the centre. Not a sign could they see of the tiger, however. At last, as they neared

an accumulation of rocks from which a huge boulder jutted out overhanging the slope, only some four or five yards from Ramsay, and immediately to his right, there came a warning shout of 'Khubberdār!' ('Take care!') from the look-out man on the opposite bank. Owing to the noise of the beaters above, the sportsmen could not hear it, and the next moment with a blood-curdling roar the tiger charged straight out!

Ramsay had just time to put his rifle to his shoulder and pull, when the next moment he was knocked over, and he and the tiger rolled over in a confused heap, and went crashing through the bushes down the bank's side. In the surprise and confusion consequent on this sudden and unexpected attack, Byng and Douglas had stepped back, and overbalancing themselves fell. When they rose again, bewildered, Jack and the tiger had disappeared, whilst the beaters were flying terrified in all directions!

'Jack! Jack! where are you? are you hurt?

Sing out, for God's sake, man, and let us know where you are,' shouted young Douglas.

But no response came. He and Byng looked blankly at each other. They seemed simultaneously to realize that their friend had been carried off by the tiger, and that in all probability he was dead!

'We can't stand here, Byng, doing nothing,' said the lad, after a pause, 'let us try and track the brute up anyhow;' and so without more ado the two set out on their perilous errand.

The tracking did not prove a difficult task; the trail was only too apparent, from the shreds of poor Ramsay's clothes torn off by the sharp thorns through which he had been dragged, and pools of blood lying here and there. A few paces down-hill they came on his hat, then on his rifle.

They had nearly reached the bottom of the slope when Douglas stopped suddenly. His quick eye had detected a slight movement in the brushwood below him, on the edge of the little open space between the island and the

bank, and only some forty yards from him. Motioning to Byng to stop, he raised his rifle to his shoulder, keeping his eye fixed on the spot. The next moment the head and shoulders of the tiger appeared. The brute had Ramsay's inanimate body in his mouth, and was dragging it along by the arm near the shoulder. At the sight Douglas felt his heart beat as if it would burst, and his eye-balls almost started from their sockets; but with an effort he kept cool and aimed as carefully as he could at the tiger's head. He knew it was a great risk, and how much depended on the shot. What if he should kill his friend, dear old Jack? Anything, however, was better than letting him be carried off under his very eyes. Even if he were not already dead—better a thousand times death by the bullet of a friend, than being slowly tortured and chewed up by that bloodthirsty fiend. He felt he *must* fire; and as the tiger emerged fully from the covert, and paused for a moment before crossing to the island, he pulled!——

At the report, there was a loud and angry roar, the tiger dropped his burden, sprang high in the air, with a bullet through his brain, and fell back with a convulsive struggle by his victim, the blood of both mingling on the sand!

The man-eater of Dolara was dead, and Jack Ramsay avenged!

CHAPTER VII.

WHY DID HE DO IT?

LET us return again to Forde Manor, where early summer was coming over the land. Her approach was heralded, as often in our island, by constant showers that beat down the meadow-grass, and covered the ground with snowy carpets of horse-chestnut petals, and pear and apple blossom. But, between-whiles, the spring winds blew soft and fresh in one's face, and the moist earth sent up a rich steaming incense of fragrance; and, at every gleam of stray sunshine between the rains, a chorus of birds burst out in such a glad twittering and

trilling of gladness, as could hardly be surpassed in the finest of weather.

It was very quiet inside the big wrought-iron gates of Forde. As yet no carriage passed the lodge, and all cards were dropped there in deference to Violet's wishes that she might be left undisturbed in her mourning seclusion. All through the park, and among the woods, one might wander in a solitude almost equalling that of Robinson Crusoe.

Of course there were neighbours who expressed themselves surprised that Miss Vyvian did not go 'abroad,' or away somewhere, instead of shutting herself up like some enchanted princess behind her park-walls. But, whatever one does, there are always some people ready to wonder that one does not do the contrary.

Violet felt what was best for herself; and this tranquil time among her own woods and walks, where every tree had known her from a child, and seemed a friend that felt for her great trouble of mind and the shock that for awhile had unnerved her, was more restorative than the bustle

of travelling, or the loneliness in a crowd of seaside or foreign towns.

And then all the rest of her neighbours, near and far, showed themselves so kind, their best feelings touched by the strange, brief tragedy in which she had played so prominent a part. For five-and-twenty years back, there had not been seen thereabouts such a great funeral as that of poor Cyril Vyvian. No one was asked to attend; the proceedings were kept as quiet as possible, and yet somehow news of the hour and day was passed round everywhere. From far and near the county families and the lesser gentry came, the Marshwood Vale Hunt to a man, the farmers and even the villagers and labourers in crowds with their wives and children. And in all that gathering of pitying, sympathising faces there was hardly an eye but felt some unusual moisture, as after the coffin was slowly borne into the churchyard between the ranks of gazing spectators, who drew back hushed and awestruck, all eyes turned on the slight girlish figure who followed as chief

mourner, dressed all in white as if she was a bride, though a widowed one in truth.

'She looked like a snowdrop, so sweet and pale,' said some of them afterwards. And, though Violet Vyvian had always been a favourite among her neighbours, never before had the hearts of these so gone out to her, as when they saw the young lonely girl, the last of her family, standing by the grave of her promised bridegroom. And the vicar's strong voice had never so faltered in reading the beautiful and solemn words of our burial service since ever he was ordained; for all the while in his heart he could not rid himself of the remembrance that this day should have been the eve of Violet's married life, that the morrow was to have been her wedding-day.

Most of the people present marvelled at Violet's calm bearing, though they understood it by the stunned, bewildered look on her white face. Some, indeed, found it affected them more 'than anything else,' as they afterwards declared, and at one moment Violet was herself roused

by a sudden big sob near her, and raised her downcast eyes involuntarily to recognise with faint wonder that it came from Major Ball. The little man was staying with the Blatherwicks; having been previously invited by them for Violet's wedding, he now came down at his own request expressly to pay the last tribute of friendship at poor Cyril's funeral. Profuse as ever in his feelings, he fairly broke down on seeing Violet, and, as he afterwards declared to Mr. Blatherwick, 'made a fool of himself.'

'I've often seen you make far more of a fool of yourself,' was Billy's gruff rejoinder, who liked his guest the better for it, having felt much the same sensation of ridiculous weakness himself.

Then, when all was finished, what showers of hothouse flowers were thrown into the open grave; while the eager hands of little school-children had gathered so many wild blossoms that all around was strewed a carpet of primroses and violets.

Many a one had for weeks past been cherishing early flowers in cottage windows, and told

Miss Vyvian, when she called in passing, that these were for her wedding. Well, now they were for her promised husband's funeral! Violet, for the first time that day, broke down as she glanced round at the sea of faces all gathered there to feel with her, to sorrow for her. She was obliged to draw down her veil, and old Mr. Bentley, who had stood beside her all the time, led her away weeping, supported on his arm, while Rufus O'Brien and Mrs. Beaumont walked on her other side.

'How good they all are—how kind! It affects me more than if they did not care,' said Violet, as, alone with Margaret Beaumont in her own carriage, she locked her hand in that of her friend. And then she repeated as she had done before several times—but only to this trusted friend—

'O, Margaret, *why* did he do it?'

'Why did he do it?' she went on aloud to herself. If he had heavy debts, he might have trusted me. Yes, I should have forgiven them.'

For awhile Margaret was sorely perplexed how to answer. She, perhaps alone of all people living save Kate, had an inkling of what was nearest the truth, but on that point she was resolved to keep silent. At last she bethought herself to say,

'Dear, it was Cyril's secret. May he not have been tempted by stress of circumstances, or carried away by his passions, to some action in his life that you might think disgraceful. Had you known it, you might have forgiven, yet not been able to bring yourself to marry him. Perhaps he found it would be impossible to keep this knowledge from you as his wife; and he chose death rather than you should learn it.'

'It may have been so,' said Violet, slowly, with a long sigh. 'And, if so, it seems to me there is but one way in which I may do a last thing for him,—and, who knows, give his poor spirit rest,—that is, by trying not to trouble myself more about what he did not wish me to know.'

'Poor Vyvian! Why did he do it?' That was the wondering question on all lips in the neighbourhood, for even more than the proverbial nine days of gossip. The doctor's opinion, who saw Cyril's body and the position in which his revolver had fallen, was reluctantly given to the effect that it seemed unlikely that death was the result of accident. 'But why should he take his own life?' people vainly reiterated. A young fellow with the ball at his feet, so to speak; with the prospect of everything that should made existence almost perfectly happy. He must have been out of his mind.

Some witnesses gave evidence of having met young Mr. Vyvian coming through the woods towards his house that day about noon; he looked terribly pale, they said, and passed them without seeming to recognise them. His servants told how he had taken no lunch, but had shut himself up in his own room.

Mrs. O'Brien, who was one of the last persons who saw Cyril alive, only repeated mechanically what she had before told Violet. Mr. Vyvian

came in and asked for her husband. Hearing Rufus was busy, he went away. 'That was all she could tell them,' she added, with ashy lips (her conscience excusing the sophistry on the plea that she *could* not indeed say more). Did he look ill? She had not noticed him much at the time, but looking back now she feared he did. Mrs. O'Brien seemed so upset since the shock of the sad event that she was spared questioning as far as possible.

It was remarked by a good many people, and rather severely commented on, that Mrs. O'Brien only, of all Violet's intimate friends, had not appeared at Cyril's funeral, 'and he was such a friend of hers at one time!' it was added, in a hostile spirit. People thought very unkindly of Kate in those days, though nothing was openly said. 'O, no—for nothing could be proved.'

But Violet herself had urged Kate after that fainting-fit not again to overtax her nerves. It was she who was, unknowingly, the unhappy woman's warmest friend just then. For Kate had

come the morning after Cyril's death, as Violet sat alone plunged in dejection and sorrow, and throwing herself on the ground at her friend's feet, while she buried her head in the lap of the girl, gave way to an outburst of passionate grief.

'Oh, Violet, Violet, I want to tell you how sorry I am for you,' she sobbed. 'It wrings my heart when I think how unkind I was often to you last spring—and summer. And you forgave me so sweetly; and—and now—! But it will never happen again, dear, never. Only let me try to make up to you for the past; indeed, indeed, I will try.'

This fresh scene tried poor Violet's already sorely-tasked nerves, yet she was grateful and touched by Kate's intensity of penitent affection, though wondering a little at it. Rufus, on the other hand, was shame-faced and vexed that his wife, of whose courage he had often boasted, should now show 'no more pluck than a chicken.' He did not understand her; nor Cyril's death—but no one else understood *that*.

Inexplicable! that was the general verdict pronounced at last by the whole neighbourhood, when all the contradictory rumours and suggestions, uttered with deprecations and hushed breath, were proved untenable as opinions. No: no one knew the truth about it, in spite of mysterious suppositions. And—old Mr. Bentley and some other friends of influence having added solemnly, that, as nothing now ever could be known, the truest kindness to poor Vyvian's memory was there to let the matter rest—to their credit, be it said, the neighbourhood and county society in general almost universally adopted this recommendation, which was felt to be prompted by good taste. The dead surely have a right to their own secrets.

There is plenty of thoughtfulness, after all, in society, however heartless the latter may seem, if some leader only appeals to the good feeling of the others. No one wishes to be outdone in delicacy or consideration. If a right note is only struck, many, who would be otherwise unconscious of the dumb music in their

souls, respond at once with a surprised vibration.

'How good they all are! How much kindness there is in the world, after all,' Violet repeated, very often, with an emotion that though melancholy was yet pleasurable.

'Yes,' said Margaret Beaumont. 'Where else should we get our ideals of goodness and friendship, if they had never been practised on earth! *I* am not surprised by it.'

'If I was a daughter or a sister, they could hardly have called more often or written more honestly sympathising letters, so nice in expression, too,' said Violet, with grateful tears welling up in her bright eyes.

'They are really fond of you. Be happy in the knowledge of that, for it is a great blessing in life to be beloved. I don't know whether it is a gift, or an acquired grace, but, whatever the secret is, many of us would be glad to learn it,' smiled Margaret Beaumont. She was thinking Violet little knew that her own presence had seemed like sunshine wherever she came; and

that it was perhaps because of the girl's honest faith in the virtues and lovableness of almost all her neighbours, and her proud conviction from childhood that there was no such other happy shire in all England as this in which she had been born and bred, that caused her now unconsciously to reap a harvest of the affection she had herself lavished on all around her from a warm young heart brimming over with frankness and generous kindness.

Day by day, therefore, under the benign influences of friendly sympathy, youth's elastic powers of recuperation, and nature's soothing calm, Violet gradually recovered her spirits. She mourned for Cyril truly, deeply; but it was as a dear friend and kinsman, rather than as one to whom the best rich wine of a woman's love has been given.

Often, however, there came hours of depression and gloom, in which the loneliness, from which the solitary girl had often suffered before, was greater than ever. The darkness seemed deepened over her own future ten-fold.

'It is evidently my fate to be alone; there is no use in pitying myself too much. There are so many women who have to go through life *poor*, and without friends or comforts,' thought the mistress of Forde at such times, with a sad little smile on her lips whilst she tried to cheer herself.

So, as was said, the full summer came after long waiting, and Violet was, if not yet her old, light-hearted, healthy self again, yet growing to look brighter and better day by day. But it was not so with Mrs. O'Brien.

One morning, Margaret Beaumont calling as usual put the question that was now becoming habitual:

'And how is poor Kate to-day?'

'Ah! she is not at all well, I am afraid, poor Kate,' Violet answered, with a troubled look. 'There seems nothing exactly the matter with her. She is the cheeriest one of us always, but she eats next to nothing, and she is growing quite thin and changed.'

'And yet she is in good spirits, you say?'

'O, yes. Whenever I am with her—or Rufus either, I believe—she is always trying to brighten us up, and is ready for anything now-a-days, as you know, in the way of a walk with the dogs, or down to the kennels to chat with old Tom, or to see Haggett; just what she used to hate formerly.'

'I know,' quietly responded Margaret, musing.

And, indeed, considering she was up at Forde Manor every day, it would have been strange if she had not known. But it happened upon that very morning she had been the startled witness of a scene that caused her secretly to doubt the genuineness of Kate's good spirits. Coming from Littleforde through the shrubberies, the path skirted what had once been a quarry-pit, but that was now transformed into a rosary. Creepers and shrubs found coigns of vantage on its sides, while a fringe of tall pines rose behind outlined against the sky, and roses in thickets and hedges, as standard bushes, or trained on arches, filled the midst of the sheltered space.

The rosary was a most secluded little spot, especially in the mornings. No one ever went there then, when Violet was busy with her multifarious duties, and Rufus O'Brien was acting as her secretary and right-hand man, generally speaking. No one passing by, either, could spy through the thick-clipped bank of laurels that hedged in the front of the garden. Only, at one spot, the drip from an overhanging tree had thinned a laurel bush, and there any inquisitive person parting the branches low down might survey the hidden plot.

One small soul had been peeping through in this way only half-an-hour ago. This was Dolly, who, after once making the discovery, almost invariably in passing remembered to push her small face through the branches, though never yet had her curiosity been rewarded by any more remarkable sight than a blackbird hopping boldly on the walk, or a wagtail flirting his tail in the spring that gurgled from the rock. But on this morning, peeping as usual into the enchanted ground (as she privately

thought it), Dolly beckoned so earnestly with gestures admonishing silence that her mother smilingly stooped down while the little maid kept tugging at her arm, and eagerly bidding her in a whisper to look.

'Mrs. O'Byan *cwying!*' uttered the child, awe-struck.

Margaret put her gently aside.

'O, no! You are mistaken, Dolly dear. She—she is only taking a fly out of her eye with her handkerchief, I think.'

But that glimpse had given Margaret a vivid impression of such an abandonment of grief, as had weighed upon her mind ever since. The woman's figure within there, seated on a bench, was bowed down sideways, as if her misery was *too* great to endure.

'By-the-way, where is Kate? Shall we go and find her? I have a holiday this morning, for a wonder,' now went on Violet; to which proposal Margaret briefly agreed.

'Let's look in the little rose-garden. I *fink* she might be there,' put in Dolly, with a roguish

look at her mother. And in the rose-garden they accordingly found Kate. She had started up at the sound of Dolly's voice, who kept calling, 'Mrs. O'Byan! Mrs. O'Byan. We was looking for you;' and came to meet them quite brightly as Violet anticipated. There was a curious flush on her cheeks, where her hands had been pressed to her face, and a strange look in her eyes. But her sorrow, whatever the cause, had been almost tearless. She began talking at once with what Margaret saw was a forced gaiety, but so well-feigned that Violet, who would have been ready to declare she knew thoroughly Kate's every mood, was quite deceived by it.

'How nice that you have no horrid letters to write this lovely morning, Violet dear,' was Kate's greeting. 'I am so glad you have both come to dawdle about with me. Horribly lazy, isn't it, Mrs. Beaumont, to be a do-nothing? I am ashamed of myself, when you two are always so busy; but it is such delicious weather for idling.'

Idling! Margaret had never felt much sym-

pathy for the speaker heretofore, but her heart ached for the poor soul at these words, whatever the cause of Kate's hidden misery might be.

'Have you dot a fly in your eye?' demanded Dolly, with sympathising curiosity, staring up earnestly at Mrs. O'Brien.

Margaret hastily drew the little inquisitor to her own side.

'Silly Dollikins. She is always thinking everyone is like herself; her own eyes are such terrible fly-traps. She got a big fly in one the other day, and has never forgotten it.'

'It was a week ago, and it was in my *mouf*—' murmured Dolly, with injured feeling, her little cheeks reddening that mother should make a mistake over so painful an event, when for ever so long she had nearly 'chokit.'

She slipped round to Violet's side, who saw something was amiss, for they two were fast friends; so took her petted visitor off to the swing that had been hung under a great cedar for little Miss Beaumont's special delight.

'A game of romps with the child does Violet more good, I believe, than all our attempts to divert her mind,' said Margaret, watching them.

'Yes,' slowly answered Kate, with a slight catch in her breath, 'I would give a great deal to be able to do a little more for her. But do you really think she feels *his* death inconsolably?' (in a hesitating voice). 'It may seem unkind, but I have so been hoping she would not—after a little while.'

'I understand . . . yes; I agree with you, we may reasonably think so. It is no unkindness,' answered Margaret.

And there was such a cheering, brisk reassurance in her voice as brought comfort to the troubled soul, that was eagerly listening for her answer.

CHAPTER VIII.

KATE'S REPENTANCE.

NEXT day, Mrs. Beaumont did an unusual thing.

She first coaxed her small tyrant of a daughter to 'help mother,' by undertaking the responsible and weighty task of going to buy pins and cotton-reels in the village, accompanied by nurse as privy-councillor and purse-bearer. Next she herself set off for Forde Manor, as was a very frequent occurrence. But, instead of going directly to the house and asking for Violet, she quietly betook herself on a search through all the most secluded nooks of the pleasure-grounds, including the rosary.

In vain! Kate O'Brien was not so easily to be found.

After pausing to think awhile, Margaret tried in a fresh direction. There was a rather gloomy wood on a slope from which a view could be had of the old Manor-house, poor Cyril's home; and following a disused path that led there, which necessitated plunging courageously through long grass and brambles, she came at last upon the object of her search.

Kate O'Brien was seated on the mossy ground under a tree. In front was a little opening in the wood through which one caught a glimpse of the valley beneath and the old Manor grounds opposite. It was a damp spot and dismal, for the trees were wind-blown and stunted. Her hat lay carelessly on the ground, and her head was buried in her hands.

No doubt thinking herself safe from observation, she was deaf to Margaret's light footfall on the grassy path. Then—as if feeling some one was looking at her—she suddenly raised her head, with two large tears stealing down her cheeks,

and started violently on finding herself discovered.

'You need not mind me, dear—Violet is not here,' said Margaret, soothingly, putting her hand on Kate's shoulder, and, before the latter could rise or speak, she had sat down beside her.

'I have a fit of neuralgia to-day—it makes me cry like a child,' Kate answered sullenly, rather defiantly. 'And here I thought no one would come—people who are out of sorts are such a nuisance.'

'You had it yesterday, too. Dolly and I saw you in the rosary seeming in pain. My dear, *I was so sorry for you.*'

A thrill of alarm shot through Kate. She asked, quick and low,

'Was that why Violet came to find me? You told her perhaps——'

'No, no; she knows nothing. Don't be afraid. But it is why I came alone to search for you to-day, to say how much I feel for your great trouble. My poor Kate, I can guess how

terrible it is to keep anything on your mind to yourself.'

The brown eyes looked with a world of pity and lovingness straight into Kate's clouded face; the gentle voice was tender as that of a mother speaking to her own child when it was sick. Yet Kate trembled visibly and turned very white.

'What do you mean?' she asked low; 'keep what to myself? What do you—suppose?'

'I think you have taken Cyril's violent death very greatly to heart,' returned Margaret, with quiet frankness. 'Perhaps you are even blaming yourself for your flirtation with him last year. To be honest with you, I happen to know how far that went . . . but come, dear, cheer up! You sent him away then; you would not listen to him.'

Kate, whose startled eyes had been fixed upon the speaker with a growing terror, now burst violently into tears.

'But he blamed me, all the same. He said it was my doing only, that he was mad enough to

urge me to—to—O, I am betraying the dead! What do you know? how do you know anything?'

Very gently Margaret told her of the scene, to which she had been an unwilling witness, that winter morning when she left the skaters to find Kate, who was a prisoner in the house from cold.

'You acted wrongly, no doubt, at first; but you followed the better promptings of your heart afterwards. I was glad of it, and often should have liked to tell you so.'

'Yes, if the matter had rested there! If I had always done so!' answered Kate, wildly. Then impelled by the longing to confide in some one, with a woman's craving to confess and seek sympathy, she besought Margaret in imploring tones,

'If I tell you something, will you promise never to repeat it to any human being? I believe I can trust you!—you would never tell Violet?'

Then as Margaret Beaumont gave the re-

quired promise, which so many thousands of women exact and solemnly affirm—and then often forget in half-an-hour, but which this time would be honestly kept, for the little widow had unusual reticence in the affairs of friendship —Kate began to unburden her bosom. She did not tell her secret all at once. The cause of Cyril's death was too dreadful for her to venture on divulging it yet; she must beat about the bush, poor creature, first, and lead up by degrees to the subject.

So, in spite of that earnest promise and the immense relief of opening her heart to a friend in whom she could thoroughly trust, Kate only began explaining her own early story. She told of grinding poverty in her father's home, and how, fresh from school, she had married Rufus O'Brien—not greatly caring for him, but hoping to gain freedom and escape from the prospects of drudgery as a governess. Once married, she sought admiration, thinking it no harm.

'But, still, if I was not exactly ever in love

with my husband I liked him better than almost anyone else, and I trusted and respected him always. As to poor Cyril, I never *really* cared for him. It was very wicked of me, of course, but I only began our flirtation out of vanity, though it was deadly earnest with him then . . . and so matters went on——'

Kate broke down at moments in dry, choking sobs; then began going over the old ground, this time entering into details, and blaming herself wildly.

Margaret consoled the poor creature as best she could, while feeling there was more to come for which she must wait patiently. After all, though Kate had been vain and heartless, yet Cyril, from being a willing victim to her powers of fascination, was soon, it appeared, carried away by his passions to becoming the tempter in his turn. Above all things, Margaret Beaumont was a fair-minded woman, and in this matter she tried to mete even justice, and not allow pity to blind her to the dead man's faults.

Then followed a short silence. Kate's downcast glance wandered uneasily over the ground beside her; her features twitched. Now that it had come to the point, she felt as if she could not bring herself to say the last—and worst!—to divulge the true story of that terrible spring morning, when Cyril had come in through the terrace-window. Was it necessary to tell it, after all? Had she yet betrayed herself by her late words.

Even while Kate hesitated, Margaret asked, quietly, in the curious way that two people often have of thinking of the same thing at the same moment,

'And you saw Cyril that last morning he was alive? You spoke to him about all this, perhaps; and very likely reminded him of the past.'

'*How do you know?*' Kate started upright, feeling stung to fresh remorse. The sullen look left her face, but she gazed at Margaret as if the latter had some mysterious power in divining her thoughts.

'I only know it must have been so,' was the quiet rejoinder. 'Don't you think you might as well tell me all about it, dear; as you meant to do, I feel sure, when first you began. I have guessed lately that you alone knew the true cause of Cyril's death. It may ease your mind to tell me; and your secret will be sacred.'

'I will tell you,' said the unhappy woman, presently, in a muffled voice.

And without pause, as if fearing to lose courage, she plunged into the whole story of the suicide. Once she had begun, to do her justice, Kate, with a reckless feeling that her confessor should know the worst, kept nothing back. She told the whole tale truthfully, as if standing in the witness-box upon her oath. She glozed nothing; concealed nothing. Her own hatred of poverty, and shrinking from being cast adrift on the world, as it were, from their comfortable quarters at Forde Manor; then anger and annoyance that Cyril, of all men, should be the one to thrust her out; beyond all, her true belief,

then, that Vyvian had been actuated by selfish motives in his courtship, and that Violet was not really happy in mind though she had engaged herself to her cousin.

It was all genuine. Margaret could not doubt for a moment that Kate was telling her aught other than the truth. As the scene rose before the listener's mind of Cyril's misery and his death in the old study on that twilight spring evening, but some few short weeks ago, as it still seemed, the gentle woman was appalled.

Then she roused herself to falter whatever of truest kindness and solace her tender heart could suggest in so unusually painful a case. It was a difficult task, yet the pity and the love which had begun to spring up in Margaret's mind for this poor erring soul, as she felt for all those brought within her knowledge who were sorrowful or afflicted, inspired her with words of consolation. Even without these, it was a relief and comfort unspeakable, like balm to poor Kate's aching mind, that she might sit

silent with her hand softly held in Margaret's kindly clasp, and see those gentle brown eyes meeting hers in sympathy and understanding.

In half-an-hour after she had first begun her recital, though Kate O'Brien still wiped away occasionally some trickling tears that ran down her cheeks, and that sprang as much now from gratitude to this friend, as from remorse at the past, yet she had grown calmer than she had been for weeks.

'How was it that you thought of searching for me here?' she asked, presently. 'Did you guess I might be taking a last look at the old Manor-house, before it is pulled down next week?'

'Yes, dear: that was it. I am glad that Violet has given way to her agent's advice, and has consented to demolish those tottering old walls before they fall into a heap of ruins. It will be better for both of you not to see the old Manor-house again, as it used to be. All that will be left is a newer part near the stables, just two or three rooms downstairs that will lodge

the old servants comfortably for their lives, and there is enough accommodation overhead for a bachelor, if Violet should some day require a new agent.'

Both women were still sitting and talking in the wood, when the clanging of the great stable-bell startled them.

'That is for me. I am late for lunch, and could not hear the gong out here. Violet makes such a fuss about me now when I am late for meals, as if I was an invalid,' exclaimed Kate, rising unwillingly to her feet. 'Do come and let me talk to you again. I have not said half I want to tell you. You have done me so much good . . . May I talk to you again?'

Of course Margaret promised to come; so the next day, and during many more days, they two held their private meetings in the tranquil quiet of the woods, till Kate had repeated much of her sad story and her bitter self-accusations and repentance many times over, and Margaret had striven to comfort her again and again. The shock of Cyril Vyvian's suicide had indeed so

greatly affected Mrs. O'Brien's mind that she was brooding continually on the subject.

If Margaret could not come daily to her, Kate would now always make some excuse herself to walk down to Littleforde. The longing to see her only confidant constantly had taken strong possession of her; besides, though often pricked to the heart by Margaret's tender but earnest warnings and admonitions for the future, she found such soothing relief in them for the past that she always came back to this patient, loving teacher.

Kate's higher education had begun in repentance and searching of spirit.

'Poor Kate! what has made her and Margaret Beaumont such friends, I wonder?' thought Violet, on beginning to notice the intimacy. She was really glad to see it, for it had always been a little trouble to her that these two had hitherto kept on either side of herself, so to speak, but never went together.

'It will do Kate good,' decided the girl, with warm-hearted pity, 'poor soul!'

They all spoke habitually of Mrs. O'Brien as 'poor Kate' now, which is always a bad sign of the mental or bodily well-being of the person spoken of; though the expression rose so naturally to their lips, they gave it no thought.

CHAPTER IX.

A MESSAGE FROM THE EAST.

'HONEST confession is good for the soul,' says the proverb. So Kate O'Brien evidently found, for after some days a more placid look came back to her features, her efforts at cheerfulness in Violet's presence were less forced. Alone with Margaret, her confessor, she was less agonised in spirit, and owned that though she had been previously haunted by dreadful dreams at night, or else had lain a prey to wakefulness, she now began again to enjoy the ineffable blessing of sleep without constant recourse to the fiend chloral.

But something still remained behind unconfessed. Kate jealously guarded the other secret regarding Jack Ramsay, or strove to do so. 'I will *never* tell that!' she repeated to herself, all the more keenly alive to the shame and poignant pain of such a revelation, that in this matter she only was to blame. Jack had been wholly innocent; he had never hurt her by so much as an unkind word, or thoughtless action.

'No, no—far otherwise!' mused Kate, remembering only two well his handsome face and manly bearing; how kind he used to be to almost everyone, and how utterly honest; so upright and honourable himself he could never suppose her capable of having done him such injury. As many persons try to renounce the error of all their ways, except just a few pet failings, and still—

> 'Compound for sins they are inclined to,
> By damning those they have no mind to,'

so Mrs. O'Brien locked *that* secret of her own falsehood in the deepest oubliette of her mind,

and tried hard to forget it. But she could not refrain from frequently, cautiously, creeping, as it were, as near the subject in conversation with Margaret as she dared. She longed that Jack's cousin should talk openly about him, his possible future, and his feelings; she craved to hear something—any news—of him. But Margaret saw through these feints, and thought it best to be silent.

At last the self-tortured woman could bear it no longer, and once or twice she screwed up her courage to mention Captain Ramsay, in a low voice and with downcast eyes.

'Will he come back, do you think? . . . come back for Violet's sake, I mean?'

'I cannot say, dear. Leave all that to rest for the present; till Cyril's grave is green,' replied Margaret, gravely. She guessed that the grand passion of this stormy, undisciplined heart had throbbed for Jack Ramsay, and she was sorry; so sorry.

But if Mrs. O'Brien was somewhat more at ease in her mind now, there seemed little im-

provement in her bodily health. The warmth of summer came at last, with a glad burst after all the rains of May and early June, but it brought no roses to her cheeks, although those in the garden bloomed in glorious clusters. Her step grew daily less elastic, her figure lost its rounded outlines, and the cough, that had alarmed her friends in winter, became still more troublesome.

Curiously, Kate seemed not to notice the change in herself. When Violet sometimes spoke to her anxiously about her health, she only answered, with a perfectly careless, hopeful smile,

'Remember, the doctor said last time that there was nothing the matter with me. O, Rufus told me so afterwards—don't try to deny it. And *don't* make me ridiculous by sending for him again. It is only nervousness, you know.'

Sometimes Kate wearily wondered within herself whether she *really* wished Jack Ramsay back, and reconciled to Violet. She had

thought she did, during Cyril's engagement, when such an event seemed far away in the shadowy future, and she fancied herself doomed. But *now*,—that was the question?

O, she did not know, only she repented—she repented!

'Here's a parcel for you from India, Violet. It's all done up in a tin box and canvas, as neat as ninepence. I'll bet anything you like it's something from Jack Ramsay, and, if so, it will be worth the having.'

So spake Rufus out of the unthinking fulness of his heart, eager to take interest in all that concerned the young mistress of Forde. He brought the package himself into the hall as he spoke, and laid it on the great, dark oak-table among the piles of newspapers and magazines that were spread thereon in true country-house profusion.

He did not notice the set expression of Violet's face as the girl asked him to force open the lid of the tin box for her. But then, having turned

away after doing so, subsiding into an arm-chair and burying himself in some most interesting details on dog-doctoring in the *Field*, he was startled presently on looking round to see Violet standing still where he had left her, but with large bright tears slowly coursing down her cheeks.

The poor girl was holding a letter in her hand—Jack's letter of congratulation which he had laid in the box with his wedding-present—and its manly kind tone had quite overcome her, arousing, too, such bitter-sweet remembrance of the past.

'Violet! my dear girl! What is the matter? come—what is it at all, at all?' exclaimed Rufus, jumping on his long legs as if galvanised. He spoke very gently, with a half comical yet rueful tone, using one of his absurd Irish expressions that generally made Violet laugh, in the way he comforted Dolly, when that small person fell and rasped her hands, or imagined herself injured enough to howl. Now, Violet was one of the few women alive who do look

well in tears. Her sweet grey eyes only grew larger and more limpid while brimming with woe; her nose did *not* get red; and her firm mouth quivered only just enough to show that she was bravely trying to fight her weakness, but that she wanted a little help sadly.

Rufus could think of nothing else but to pat her shoulder mechanically, with his large heavy hand coming down as regularly as the strokes from a Nasmyth hammer. In reality he was so deeply touched that, as he said to himself, it was as much as flesh and blood could do to forbear kissing Violet, out of pure desire to prove his sympathy and give her consolation; she looked so pretty and so weak for the moment, so much in need of being caressed and comforted. Only an inkling that the remedy might not prove agreeable helped his heroic effort to refrain himself.

The scene was becoming a little ludicrous, as Violet suddenly felt, when Rufus began to pat still harder on her back, now, as if she had a fishbone in her throat, and was choking; and, her

emotion changing, she broke into a little hysterical laugh and dried her eyes.

'There! thank you, Rufus—I am better now. It was only a—a wedding-present from Captain Ramsay, you know, and thinking about it I broke down foolishly.'

(All Violet's other wedding-presents had been carefully sent back to their owners some time ago. Margaret Beaumont, that ever-helpful friend, had herself fulfilled this task, without stirring up Violet's grief afresh at her cousin's untimely end.)

But Rufus was not so easily blinded, as he said to himself. He had seen Miss Vyvian weep naturally and sincerely for him who was to have been her husband; had watched her grief and horror lessen by gentle degrees till the pain was assuaged and only a shadow remained on the naturally bright-hearted girl's face, and an unwonted stillness upon her daily life. This fresh gush of sorrow was therefore unaccountable on the score of poor Cyril, thought O'Brien;

and he put his head a little on one side, unconsciously, as he stole a searching sidelong glance at the mourner.

('No; it's crying as much for what might have been, as for what is,' he sagely concluded. 'For Jack Ramsay was the man for her, if it hadn't been for that blessed will, as anyone with half an eye could see. And Cyril, heaven forgive the poor lad! was only second-best.')

Aloud he said gently, with a slow motion of head that wagged his great red beard to and fro,

'It's a pity, Violet dear, that you had to banish that poor fellow, isn't it now? Of course, I could guess how it was. You did not altogether want to give up your fortune and the old place, and small blame to you; and he, like the thorough gentleman he is, either dared not ask you at all to do it for his sake, or was too proud to ask oftener than the once. Eh!'

Violet coloured like a rosy sunset cloud.

'You are wrong—I mean not quite right,

Rufus,' she answered, in a stifled voice. 'Captain Ramsay may have liked me . . . (I believe he *did*). But that might not keep him from liking others better. In fact—O, I can't tell you more! Only I somehow doubted that he really liked me *best*.'

Rufus was silent a moment, giving an inward 'whew!' Then he answered, firmly,

'You need not doubt that, then, my dear girl, any more. For if mortal man speaks truth, trust Jack Ramsay to do so. And I'll tell you now, what I've never said before even to Kate, thinking he would not care for it to be repeated, poor fellow, that I saw him the day before he sailed. (You remember that time I ran up to London to see about buying the brown mare at Tattersall's.) Yes, I saw him at his club; and, from what he said to me, he went with a sore heart to India, I can tell you.'

'What did he say? O, how good it was of you, Rufus, to go and see him. But what did he say?'

'We had lunch together, and it was when we had about finished,' explained Rufus, with a half apologetic tone, perhaps due to the memory of that 'one glass more' of old brown sherry which had loosened his own heart-strings that afternoon. 'It was no business of mine, I'll grant you, but we had said something about the jolly time we had all together down here at Forde, and about old Harlequin, and that kind of thing, you know——'

'Yes, yes. I understand.'

'And then I wound up by wishing we might see him back once more some day. "Ah! my boy," I said, "if only we could have had you settled in Forde Manor for good; that would have been the best of all. But, since that's past praying for, it would warm my heart to see you out once more with the old Marshwood Vale." He gave my hand a great squeeze, and said, "Thanks, old fellow, but I fear many a long day will have gone by before you see me again. I will own to you that I care for Violet Vyvian, as I never have cared and never shall

care again for any other woman on earth. And, though I wish for her happiness with all my heart, I don't quite think I could stand *seeing* her married to any other man.'

Violet had turned away her face, and was desperately busy altering the arrangement of a pile of Maréchal Niel roses in a blue china bowl; but her fingers were either very unsteady, or the roses aggravating, for half of them fell on the table, scattering their overblown petals.

'And—that was all?' she murmured.

'Why, yes. I just said, maybe it would not be for his peace of mind to return, but any way I wished his good fortune might come some day before he was aware of it. And with that I shook his hand again, and said good-bye. There *was* no more to say, you know.'

'No—I suppose not.'

And with hesitating steps Violet crossed the hall, closed one of the windows, then remembering vaguely it was a hot day pushed it wider open; bent out to inhale the sweetness of

the mignonette border on the terrace below; then—becoming aware she was rudely turning her back on good Rufus, who was standing silently with patience by the central table, uncertain whether he was wanted to go or stay—she smiled in a feeble, confused manner, and murmuring that she had just 'to see about something,' went slowly upstairs.

'Dear me!' mused Rufus, burying his hands in his pockets thoughtfully and looking after her. 'I wonder, now, who would be the next of kin if she did forfeit this place? I wonder——'

For he was not certain of the precise terms of the old squire's will, and dared not ask Violet.

A fortnight later, the time had arrived when Rufus O'Brien was accustomed to make his yearly visit to Old Ireland. To his surprise, and against the wishes of her friends, Kate announced her intention of accompanying him, de-

claring the change of air would do her all the good in the world. Rufus believed her, and was delighted; for his own people were inclined to look on his wife as too fine and too English to care much about being friendly with them.

'It will please my old mother *beyond the beyonds!*' he announced, with a broad grin of satisfaction and an emphasis on the final expression that made Violet laugh. (Rufus was secretly highly pleased to rouse that merry peal once more: he was a proud man if he succeeded in accomplishing such a feat once a day, and racked his brains for whimsical idioms as her self-appointed jester.)

'And write to us once a week all the news of the place, Violet dear, won't you?' he urged; 'old Tom is not much of a penman; and a fine long letter about the young hounds and how horses are all doing, and last but not least yourself, would just gladden my heart—say, on a Sunday morning—and do to think of during the sermon. For we get forty minutes of a burst sometimes over yonder,' nodding sideways to

designate the Channel; 'and I'll not deceive you by pretending that I'm in it after the first quarter-of-an-hour.'

'Very well,' quoth Violet, agreeably. 'What day ought I to post it?'

'O, by all that's holy, I forgot,' quoth O'Brien meditatively. 'Sunday's letters always come in there on Saturday night, and even that's doubtful.'

Then, pretending to misunderstand the laughter which greeted the bull he had perpetrated in good faith, but now saw as quickly as anyone, O'Brien hastened to explain, with an air of simplicity,

'You see, the postman at my mother's place is a tailor—that is to say, he was one entirely, and now he works between walking hours at small jobs. The people pay him on Saturday afternoons, more's the pity, and he generally stands his friends a few glasses of whisky with the favourite toast thereabouts: "Here's to you, and you, boys! If this be war, may we never have peace!" After that, he's as

drunk as a fiddler; so often, if we're in a hurry for Saturday evening's letters, we just turn out and look along the roadside till we find him asleep in a ditch with his head on the mail-bag.'

Time had been when Rufus used to irritate his wife by his innocent lapse at times into strong Irish accent, or idioms she thought vulgar. But in these days, when he wilfully uttered all the Hibernicisms he could think of, she had no word of reproach. Her own real affection for Violet now taught her to understand her husband's innocent devices, and also gave her new sympathy with him. To Margaret, she frankly confided that she was going to Ireland simply to please O'Brien.

'Now, don't say a word against it. I have never done so much for him in my life, that you should dissuade me from making this little sacrifice.'

Margaret would not try thus to influence her; perhaps it was best, as she agreed with Violet. Yet these two were both uneasy as they looked

at Kate's altered, sharpened features and the hectic patches in her cheeks. And so the O'Briens left, meaning to stay in Ireland until the autumn.

CHAPTER X.

LADY GUISARD TRIES WHAT SHE CAN DO.

'It is strange,' said Margaret Beaumont, meditatively. 'I have not heard from Jack for months! Let me see—the last news was, when he wrote and sent you those boar's tushes, was it not?'

'Yes,' answered Violet, looking into the fire, on either side of which the friends were sitting after a little cosy dinner for two. 'That was the end of June, and now we are nearing October. It is a long time, as you say.'

'I remember—of course—there was another letter, a mere scrap, saying that he thought of going to Thibet, on a tiger-hunting expedition.

It came the very time when Dolly had the measles, a day or two after the O'Briens went to Ireland. I do hope he is all right—— But, as they say, no news is good news,' added Margaret, comfortably. Then she suddenly cried out,

'Oh!—I am so sorry. I beg your pardon.'

For Violet had turned a scared face upon her, and the girl's lip visibly trembled.

'Don't look like that,' went on Margaret, affectionately. 'I ought to have remembered, dear, —of course I knew—that is, I always guessed that you used to care for Jack a little.'

'Did you? Well, I am glad you know,' very slowly replied Violet, in a subdued voice. 'It has revived again of late, somehow . . . I thought it was all dead and buried long before poor Cyril died.'

'Cheer up, Violet. You will see it will all come right.'

'How *can* it come right? He is there—and I here,' was the answer, in a despairing tone.

'But he may come back soon?'

'Who knows? He may get killed out tiger-

shooting.' And at that idea Violet broke down a little, and buried her face in the sofa cushion. 'I feel convinced some accident has happened,' she murmured.

'Nonsense,' ejaculated Mrs. Beaumont, briskly. 'Look here, my child, will you trust me with what passed between you two?'

'I can't tell you all—don't ask me questions,' was the faltering reply. 'But what I can tell you, I will.'

Thereupon, though Mrs. Beaumont had not an inkling of Kate's share in the transaction, still she gleaned a faint idea of the general state of the case.

'Of course I cannot guess why you misdoubted Jack's affection,' she said, musingly. 'To onlookers, who proverbially see most of the game, it was clear as noonday; and I own I am disappointed that you in some way mistrusted his honour, dear. *That*, since I have known him from boyhood, has been untarnished. He simply could not do anything ungenerous or underhand.'

'I believe you are right,' was all Violet answered; which left the matter on that point unexplained, but satisfied Margaret as to the girl's present feelings.

Then they both talked over Jack Ramsay's good points, warming to the topic by mutual friction of words of praise. Even though Violet had kept her secret so long and bravely, yet it was not only a relief but a positive gladness at last to speak openly of her former lover. To hear little stories of his generosity, even traits of his childhood that she had not formerly known, was keen pleasure after long starvation from any such food to her love except memories —and they at one time had been banished by all the might of her will as a wrong to Cyril.

'Tell me, dear, if—no! I mean when Jack does return, should anything more come of his attachment to you, what would happen about your father's will?' queried Margaret, hesitatingly.

'I cannot tell,' was Violet's answer, with just the least tinge of impatience or sadness in her

voice. 'There was something, I remember, about leaving money for the promotion of sanitary science, whatever that means. Poor father! he had such odd whims. Ah! if only Cyril could have had the dear old place instead. But what is the use of thinking? Nothing may come of it.'

To return to events of the past summer. After the O'Briens left, Violet and her bosom friend Margaret had proposed going off together on a little trip. They were still waiting and hesitating about When and Where to go, as so many people do when perfectly free, and almost asking each other if it was worth while to go at all, when accident decided them. Dolly became unwell with a slight infantile complaint, and was ordered change of air afterwards.

So being as anxious as a hen with one chick, as she said, Margaret promptly declared she must hurry away; and as decidedly Violet was stirred to accompany her. They crossed to Normandy, as Violet shrank from English watering-places where her name might be

recognised, and her tragic love-story discussed.

After rambling about in that pleasant old-world of little towns, orchards, and farms, they wandered into Brittany, further than most visitors, scorning those villages where English was 'understanded' of the people.

When at the close of September they set foot once more on English soil, the Miss Vyvian who returned to Forde Manor was more like her old, bright, brisk self again.

'God bless you, Miss. You do be looking hearty again; that's right,' uttered old Haggett, fervently. And Tom Harkholler gave vent to a—

'Welcome home, Miss Violet,' that was uttered cheerily and loudly; all the hounds in kennel bursting into such a glad chorus of deep music, while their dappled-white bodies were all crowding and leaping up together with rejoicing and confusion on recognising their mistress's voice, as delighted her heart.

Now that Violet was known to have come back, all the carriages in the neighbourhood

were to be seen during the next few days on the road leading to Forde Manor. The neighbours, on being admitted, were even more than usually affectionate to their young favourite; and all, with one exception, studiously confined their conversation to the various questions they could possibly think of concerning Normandy and Brittany.

Mr. Blatherwick was the only one who, with his accustomed gruff frankness, burst out with the remark:

'We hope you are coming out with the hounds again, as usual, Miss Vyvian.'

His wife instantly stirred on her chair uneasily, and telegraphed to Billy a dozen scoldings and reproaches with movements of eyebrows and excited facial contortions. But Violet answered, with perfect calm,

'Thank you. I hope you will see me out on the first day. At least, I have every intention at present of resuming my duties again.'

('Sensible girl!' was Mr. Blatherwick's later commendation; then, turning on his spouse:

'She has three times as much common-sense as you, old lady. You nearly fidgeted yourself into a fit just now, with all those grimaces you made at me in the drawing-room, and you see for yourself *she* was all right.'

'Well, well, Billy,' answered his good-humoured, roundabout, better half. 'You and she always did get on famously together: I declare I shall have to be jealous.')

The one exception to those neighbours who tried to avoid all topics with Violet but the safest generalities, was Lady Guisard. That intrepid veteran of a countess and mother arrived one day whilst Violet was still at lunch, and, refusing inexorably all messages to come and join in the repast, sat herself down in the empty drawing-room to wait patiently—so she told the butler with stern voice—till Miss Vyvian had *quite* finished.

When Violet entered the room as quickly as possible, having hurriedly swallowed some last morsels of partridge, and denied herself any higher luxuries to follow, she found her lady-

ship sitting well forward in a high chair, with both hands clasped on the top of her stick, and her eyes fixed intently on the door, as if grudging the seconds.

'How-dy'-do, my dear? I am glad to see you back, and looking—well, just as a good, sensible girl like you ought to look—very well, upon the whole,' she announced, with a critical, keen, yet kindly glance at her young friend. 'I came quite early on purpose that I might find you by yourself.'

'It is very good of you,' returned Violet, wishing that she did not secretly feel that such intended kindness was inconsiderate in its manner of bestowal.

'Not at all!' promptly decided the dowager, giving a little tap of her crutch-handled stick on the floor, and glowering over it at Violet with the air of one who knew what she was about and only paid honour where honour was due. 'You were always a favourite of mine; and, though I consider you made a mistake once, we'll let bygones be bygones.'

Violet inwardly started, rightly supposing this alluded to her own rejection of the proud position that Lady Guisard's daughter-in-law would have held. How she inwardly regretted that good wedge of luncheon-cake she had just denied herself! Having the healthy appetite of a girl fond of exercise and open-air life, she felt as if it might have supported her better through the interview to follow.

In some terror she dashed into talk, but the first topic that suggested itself was unfortunate.

'The O'Briens are still in Ireland, so you really find me alone for the present; except for Mrs. Beaumont who comes to see me very often.'

'I'm glad to hear it!' snapped the visitor, who had a trick of moving her lips as if she was always eating something. 'If Mrs. O'Brien never came back at all, it would not be any matter of great regret, in my opinion; that is plain English, my dear. She and your other friend, Mrs. Beaumont, always remind me of

your good and bad angels, one on each side of you. Now, Mrs. Beaumont I approve of.'

'Yet, though you think them such opposites, they are both now on the best of terms, I assure you,' said Violet, mischievously; aware that since the old lady had once detected Kate in some slight mimicry of the Guisard peculiarities it was a case of vendetta.

'There is no accounting for such likings, except that each may be trying to get the better of the other,' severely replied her ladyship, mumbling more than ever. Then she paused a few seconds as if collecting her forces before resuming—with a sudden energy that almost took away Violet's breath.

'But I sincerely trust that you are not going to have these O'Briens always about you. *You* are not going to let them keep you from being married. A girl with your face and figure—it isn't likely!'

Violet could not speak. She was angered at her own weakness, but she felt half inclined to cry.

'There, child, I have vexed you! What a heartless old woman you will think me. But it isn't really so at all, my dear, far from it. Only that I am sincerely fond of you, Violet; next to Guisard, I do believe I care more for you than for any other living being; certainly I know no girl I would compare with you. So you see, once I knew you back again and free to do what you like with your life, I could not resist the longing that came upon me to ask you candidly if there is no fresh chance for my son.'

'I am afraid there is none.'

'Afraid, eh! you have not made up your mind? Now, *don't* interrupt, but hear me, like a dear girl. You have really no idea how much Guisard was attached to you; he took your refusal to heart in a way that made me quite sorry for the poor fellow. For days he moped and would hardly speak to anyone—not even to me.'

('Sulky! It was the first time, perhaps, his pride had such a severe fall,' thought Violet, but though she made a gesture deprecating any

further discussion the old lady pretended not to notice it, and only imperiously hurried on her argument.)

'And between ourselves, my dear Violet, I will confide in you, he is a very easily managed man. Only pretend to give in to him now and then in little things, and you can do as you please about the larger ones; now *I* can twist him round my finger. Then, besides his really liking you much more than many men do the girls that—well, that providence seems to have appointed them to marry——'

'Heiresses?' silently put in Violet, with an irrepressible, faint smile on her lips.

'You know what I mean. An old family and title like ours *must* be kept up—so ought the Vyvian name, though it is of less importance.' (The old lady was making frightful contortions of visage, being vexed at her own slip.) 'And, besides, as I was saying, though some young ladies might think that the affection of a crabbed old woman like myself need not count for much, still, as mothers-in-law are generally

thought disagreeable, it might be worth something to have one who is really fond of you. My little girl died when nine years old, Violet—I felt her loss more than you would think. And, somehow, I set my heart two years ago on the hope that you would some day be a daughter to me, instead.'

The grim old woman had really some tears in her eyes; there was an entreating, anxious look on her face that troubled Violet more than she could have supposed.

'Dear Lady Guisard,' she said, softly, putting her hand on her visitor's arm. 'I am so sorry—so very sorry! I hope you will let me see you often, and be as much to you as I can, but——'

'But you won't marry Guisard,' came sharply in reply. 'Not even if he asks you himself? He *will*; if I can promise him that he is certain not to be refused again.'

'It is impossible; indeed it is. I am not likely ever to marry at all, now.'

Lady Guisard was silent for a few seconds,

working her poor old mouth terribly, as if chewing her disappointment, and finding it a bitter morsel. Finally she said with a great effort at fairness and resignation, yet unable to keep her voice from sounding harsh,

'Well, well, child! I wish you may get a good husband, nevertheless. But, let me tell you, if you mean still to look for one in the peerage, you will find there are some worse men with titles than my son.'

'Very likely—I know he is a good son to you; and *that* has always given me a kindly feeling towards him,' answered Violet, gravely, though conscious of some pity for the Upper House. Then she kissed the old lady's withered cheek, who had risen grimly, and with an effort, being stiff from rheumatism; and in silence they parted.

Violet stood leaning against the mantelpiece, lost in thought. She felt suddenly again despondent, depressed because she had given pain against her will, and the sensation of great

loneliness in the world once more took possession of her. She did not notice that the door had opened a second time till the name of Mr. Bentley, who was being announced, struck her ear.

'What! in a brown study?' exclaimed that brisk old man, coming cheerily forward, and bearing the weight of his years with a sturdy air. He took Violet's hand, and patted it, while peering with friendly scrutiny into her face. This was the second time he had seen her since her mourning, for he had been the very first to call after his favourite's return.

'Come; you look troubled, my dear. I have just met my Lady Guisard going out looking as black as night; she would hardly deign to speak to me. May I do the simple sum of adding two and two together?' he asked, with merry kindliness.

'Provided you do not ask me whether your calculation is right,' laughed Violet.

'I'll answer for it, I am not far wrong,'

chuckled her father's old friend, with a shrewd smile. 'She came as ambassadress to offer you a coronet, I'll wager any money; and you thanked her kindly, but did not care for its encumbrance.'

He looked so sly, and hugely pleased with his own perspicuity, that Violet could not help laughing.

'Come, that's right!' went on the old squire. 'I'll tell you what, my dear girl, take my advice, and don't trouble your head any more about your father's will; I say so, though he was my best friend. Why, bless my soul! *I* know he only got so crotchetty after that fall he had when old Gameboy came down, by some accident, at a rotten little fence a donkey could have walked over, and in getting up the horse gave your father a kick on the back of the head. If he had been the man he was when we were young fellows together, he never would have signed his name to such an absurdity.'

'But how can I avoid obeying it? unless, indeed, I forfeit the estate!'

'How? Because, now poor Cyril is gone, who is to stop you from doing as you like? To my certain knowledge, there is not a living one of your family left who could inherit. Only Cyril's name was mentioned as the next-of-kin. Choose whom you like in the world, my dear. I only wish it might be some good fellow like my——well, no matter!' (He had meant to say his godson, Jack Ramsay.)

'But are you certain?' asked Violet, blushing; for she guessed whose name had almost crossed his lips.

'Certain? Perfectly certain! Why, I was one of the executors myself; and I spoke to Denny and Hardmann' (these were Violet's lawyers) 'about it yesterday, thinking somehow you might not know the rights of the case.'

'And the clause about sanitary science—some future great bequest for that purpose?'

'All stuff. That was only in case you and Cyril left no heirs, and hesitated how to bequeath the property.'

Violet stood amazed.

'No, I never knew,' she said, slowly. 'I remember being so confused when my father's strange will was read out, that I suppose I did not understand the latter part of it.'

CHAPTER XI.

JACK REDIVIVUS.

A DAMP, muggy day towards the middle of October, and the train again disgorges a passenger at Forde Station.

He is the same whose acquaintance we made in the opening chapter—Jack Ramsay. Well-nigh two years have passed since then, and in the bronzed but somewhat spare and weakened figure, that steps out with a little shiver from the warm, well-lighted first-class carriage, into the chill autumnal air, one might hesitate for a moment to recognise the handsome soldier of so little while ago; for the fierce rays of an Indian sun, and sickness, have both left their mark on

that erect, stalwart frame. His left coat-sleeve is empty, too, and he does not spring off the carriage step with the elasticity of former years.

That morning Margaret Beaumont had been surprised by getting a telegram from Ramsay, saying he was coming to see her for a few days. Some months had passed without her having received any tidings of her cousin; but knowing that he had contemplated a trip into the far-distant regions of Thibet, from whence the difficulties of communication would be great, she had not felt very uneasy on the score of his silence. It was therefore with feelings of intense pleasure, mingled with surprise, that she received the announcement that he was already in England, and would be at her house in a few hours. Kind-hearted Margaret had accordingly been busy all day making preparations for receiving her guest, and arranging all those little matters of household detail for the comfort of her visitor which only a thoughtful woman can do properly. Dolly, too, was also on the

tip-toe of excitement at the prospect of seeing 'Uncle Jack,' whom she had by no means forgotten.

At last there was a ring at the bell, and the child darted out into the hall; the next moment she was clinging round Jack's neck and covering him with kisses.

'My dear boy, I am *so* delighted to see you,' said Mrs. Beaumont, coming forward with outstretched hands, and greeting him warmly. 'Here, let me help you off with your coat—but, good gracious!' and she turned pale at the sight of the empty sleeve.

Dolly, too, noticing the deficiency for the first time, said, soothingly,

'Poor Uncle Jack, where is your other hand?'

'O! never mind,' laughed Ramsay. 'It was a naughty hand, Dolly, and so I had to have him cut off; but, if you are a good girl, I'll tell you all the story after mother has given me some tea.'

There are few things that appeal more to the

feelings of those who have spent any length of time abroad than the comforts of an English home, and Jack was no exception.

As he sat in the depths of an easy and luxurious arm-chair, an old favourite of his, warming himself before a cheery wood and coal fire, with Dolly and her mother waiting on him, and plying him with relays of tea and hot muffins, he gave a long-drawn sigh of relief, and said, as his gaze wandered round the familiar and cosy room,

'Ah! well, this *is* worth coming back for.'

After the first few moments of conversation, Dolly, who had hitherto with laudable self-control restrained herself, broke out with.

'When are you going to tell us the story of the naughty hand, Uncle Jack?'

'Well, I suppose I must give an account of myself,' smiled Jack, 'so here goes; and when I have told you all, Madge dear, I'm sure you won't scold me for not writing to you. In March I went out on a shikar expedition with

two friends, Byng and Douglas. We had pretty good sport, but at last got to a place called Dolara, where there was a notorious man-eating tiger, and this gentleman we determined to do for, though as events subsequently proved he nearly *did* for me! We put him up, and had several shots at him, and then, as he was a cowardly brute and declined to show fight, we tried "*walking* him up." Quite unexpectedly, he charged out, and I had only time to fire one barrel at him when the next moment he was on me! I can just remember seeing visions of a great pair of open red jaws and gleaming teeth, then experiencing a smell of hot, fœtid breath, being knocked flat, and seized by my left arm. I remember struggling for a moment, and then nothing more, till I found myself being carried along at night on my bed. It appeared that the brute was dragging me off (probably with a view of seeing if white man tasted better than black!) when young Douglas, like the brick that he is, followed the beast up, and shot

him dead as I was in his jaws. Both Douglas and Byng thought at first that I was dead; but with great presence of mind they dressed my wounds with carbolic acid, and had me then and there carried some seventy miles to the nearest railway-station, where I arrived more dead than alive. Luckily there was a native doctor there who did what he could for me, and I was got back to cantonments *somehow*. Then I was very ill for some two months, had fever and delirium, and all sorts of things, and they never thought I would pull through. The doctors wanted to take my arm off, but I was loth to part with it, and so hung on in the hopes it would get right. But great splinters of bone kept coming out, causing me awful pain, and the wound would not heal; so I went down to Bombay to consult a clever surgeon. The journey knocked me up again, however, and for another month or so I had a very bad time of it, and was twice given over. At last I got so sick of my arm that I consented to have it off; and thanks to God, and a pretty sound consti-

tution, got over it all. Then I got a year's sick-leave, came home—and here I am.'

'What a merciful escape!' exclaimed Margaret. 'My poor Jack—and to think that I never knew of all this.'

'Poor Uncle Jack,' whispered Dolly, in low, sympathizing tones, patting Ramsay's cheek. 'What a bad, wicked tiger. Auntie Vi will be *so* sorry.'

At the mention of Violet's name, Jack flushed up, and enquired, hesitatingly,

'How is Mrs. Vyvian and—and Cyril?'

He could not bring himself to say 'her husband.'

Mrs. Beaumont noticed his confusion, but was staggered at his ignorance of past events. Still she had presence of mind enough not to say anything before Dolly, and a moment's reflection enabled her to see that, owing to Jack's illness, he could not have heard of Cyril's sad death. She therefore turned the conversation by merely answering,

'O! Violet is very well. She is away from

home, but will be back in a fortnight, in time for the opening meet. She will be delighted to see you. But come,' she added, 'it is your bed-time, Miss Dolly; and you,' turning to Jack, 'will be glad to go and change your things. Then after dinner I will come and sit with you, whilst you have your smoke, and tell you all the news of the neighbourhood, and what has happened whilst you have been away.'

After dinner, accordingly, when coffee was brought, and the time had come for intimate conversation and the soothing influence of tobacco, Jack braced himself, with a conscious effort, to hear his cousin's budget of chat.

During dinner he felt anxious to keep their talk on all manner of subjects save the one of the Marshwood Vale Hounds and their fair M.F.H., not guessing that Margaret was equally eager to help him in this.

'What a coward I must be!' he now said to himself, with a reluctant sigh, like a boy shivering on the brink of a stream. 'Come, the

plunge must be taken sooner or later—and the sooner the better! Well, here goes!'

Subduing his voice, as he hoped, to quiet indifference Jack therefore began:

'So our Forde Manor neighbours are absent, you say?'

'Yes, Violet has gone up to London to get Mrs. O'Brien the best doctors' advice. You have not heard that poor Kate is ill? No; of course not—but you will be sorry to see her,' answered Margaret, with nervousness. 'Her lungs are attacked, they think; and she is wasting to nothing; her cheeks are quite hollow now, and her eyes seem bigger than ever. She is still handsome, of course, but when one remembers what she was——'

'She was beautiful, though it was not by any means the style of beauty that most attracted me,' replied Jack, quietly. 'But I am very sorry to hear it. Is Rufus gone with the Vyvians and Mrs. O'Brien?'

'No. He is looking after Violet's affairs, as

usual. Curiously, he does not see his wife's ill health as we all do; but then he has been with her every day, and so has grown accustomed to it gradually. Violet writes me privately that, though Kate's life may be prolonged for some years, they fear she will suffer terribly from a wasting and hopeless illness.'

'Poor woman! And why does not Cyril hunt the hounds himself? Where is he? But, of course, in town with his—with Mrs. Vyvian.'

'No,' said Margaret, low. 'No——'

'What do you mean?' asked Jack, with a start. 'You say that so strangely. *Why* is he not with Violet?'

'He will never more be with her on earth, dear Jack. His has been a sad fate. I did not like to tell all this news at dinner, for it is a very sorrowful story—but he is dead.'

'*Dead!*' The tremor that rushed through Jack's frame was visible. 'Dead! It is soon indeed for her to be a widow.'

'Not that. She was never a wife, Jack. But you shall hear the whole tale.'

As Margaret told of the tragedy that had taken place last spring in the old Manor-house, with its sad details, and of poor Cyril's happiness so ruthlessly cut short by his own sudden and desperate rashness, Jack Ramsay sat with one elbow on his knee, and his head leant on his hand—turned away so that his features were hidden—gazing into the fire. He did not utter a word, by which his thoughts could be guessed, till the end. Then he said, low:

'And so his death is considered an inexplicable mystery. Do *you* know nothing more concerning the cause?'

'That is all I can tell you,' returned his cousin, a little confused.

'All you can tell me! Yes; perhaps. But you and I may have our surmises, Madge, and I should not be greatly surprised if we both had pretty similar ones—Well! he is dead; and so no more need be said.'

Then, after a few seconds' pause, Ramsay added, in a very musing, subdued vein of thought,

'And Mrs. O'Brien is away, too, you say . . . All the better. Then I think I shall go to see Rufus to-morrow. But I am very tired to-night, Margaret, and if you will not think me selfish, dear, I should like to go off to my room. You will forgive an invalid's whims?'

Margaret looked affectionately up at Ramsay, who had risen and was leaning with his back to the fireplace. Seeing his handsome face, thin from illness, and troubled now as she fancied by some inward agitation—though he strove to hide all such signs of emotion—his empty sleeve, and the slight languor of his formerly so active frame, her heart was smitten with pity.

'Yes; go to your bed, my dear boy; and I do hope you will sleep well,' she warmly answered.

Yet she was not surprised, two hours later, to hear Jack moving restlessly overhead in his room. Margaret's story had plainly not acted as a soporific.

The next day after breakfast, a smoke, and

having glanced over the newspaper with impatient eyes, Ramsay thought to himself:

'It can't be too early, now. I'll look old Rufus up. How pleased he will be to see me!'

So, twenty minutes later, Ramsay stood once more on the well-remembered terrace before Forde Manor with its red brick walls and white stone facings.

Hearing that Mr. O'Brien was in the study, from the old butler who received Ramsay with respectful pleasure and astonishment, and glanced pityingly at where his left arm was *not*, the visitor asked with a smile to be left to announce himself.

'There is nothing like a true friend, after all. A woman who loves one may be fickle, but a man one thoroughly knows, and whose friendship has been tried—he is to be trusted *always*,' thought Jack, softly opening the study-door.

Rufus O'Brien was seated at a large bureau, with his back turned to the incomer, and numer-

ous business papers spread in confusion round his elbows that were plunged among them. His head was propped upon his hands in an attitude of absorbed attention, and he was smoking like a furnace while studying the turf-column in the *Field*.

'O, go to Jericho!' he exclaimed, in a rather savage voice, as Jack came in. 'I heard you were likely to look in this morning, but I'm not ready to see you for an hour yet. Can you not leave a poor wretch in peace?'

'All right, old fellow,' answered Jack mildly, though with pretty considerable astonishment in his voice, 'I'll come back another——'

He did not end his sentence, however; for at the sound of his voice Rufus suddenly faced round, then with a great exclamation of astonishment almost upset a heavy chair in the bound he made to greet Ramsay with outstretched hand.

'Is this *really* yourself? How, in the name of wonder, did you drop down here from the skies like this? Hallo——'

His gaze was fixed expressively on Jack's limp coat-sleeve.

'Yes,' returned Jack, quietly. 'The fortune of tiger-hunting. First of all a man-eater got me, and then my party got him. Sick-leave was the result—and here I am.'

'Sit down, old man, and tell me the whole story. Where is my pipe?—O, lucky devil that you are, why wasn't I ever born to the chance of potting a tiger!' (Rufus wished to say something extremely consolatory, so hit on the bright idea of pretending to envy his companion's loss.)

'But you seemed so particularly engaged when I came in. Shall I go for an hour to—not Jericho, but about the dear old place here, and leave you in peace?' asked Jack, with a grin.

'I thought you were the agent. You remember the old fellow—he is always bothering about business, and never will let me look at the racing news in peace.' And, with hospitable eagerness, Rufus gave a vigorous shove to the

most comfortable arm-chair, and indicated it to his guest. 'There! It isn't every day you come back, my dear boy, (and I only hope you may be back here now for good and all). So business may wait in your honour, as Violet herself would agree, I'll be bound.'

Jack felt himself as embarrassed as a shy schoolboy, at the mere mention of Violet's name. He plunged nervously into a sketch of his late hunting-tour, ending with his voyage home; and so after some talk had recovered his equanimity, when Rufus looked fixedly at him, and deliberately said,

'So that is your story . . . Well, and now, old fellow, though I am heartily sorry you have lost your arm, yet, let me tell you, it won't be the first time that a one-armed man has hunted hounds well, as I hope and trust to see you hunt our Marshwood Vale pack many a day. And I'll be as glad to have you for our M.F.H. as ever I was to have Violet herself, which is

more than I could say to any other man living.'

'The M.F.H.—me!' Jack blushed a dark red. 'Why—what do you mean?'

'What should I mean, but that, unless you wilfully refuse the blessings of Providence, you may be master here not only of the hounds, but of Forde Manor. Come, come, Ramsay, *I* don't forget what you told me of your feelings that last day before you sailed for India; so unless you have changed your mind——'

'I can never change about that, O'Brien. But—she—Violet herself sent me away.'

'Then, like many another girl, she has been wishing you back, or why should she spoil her pretty eyes crying over your wedding-present? That's all I know,' blurted out Rufus.

'No! Did she—? No mistake, old fellow? You are certain about this?' Jack's eyes sparkled now; his voice and whole demeanour were alert, as in the days of his most vigorous health.

'As certain as ever I was in my life; though what parted you both, unless it was that mad will, beats me. Go in and win—the fortune is all right now, and Violet may marry whomsoever she pleases—

'"Faint heart ne'er won fair lady."'

After a silence, Jack said, in a musing tone,

'I am thankful, now, I made up my mind on board ship to come down here. Thinking Violet was Cyril's wife long ago, it seemed so hard to return to the old place and see them. Whilst I was well, I always meant to keep away, for that reason.'

'I remember; you told me so. Then, what brought you?'

'Because, for one thing, I had no friend but my cousin Margaret to go to, my sister being out of England again. And, lying there for hours awake in my berth, it seemed to get clear to me, that if I could not endure to see the

happiness of others, even though I suffered, I must be a selfish brute. It was a struggle—but I came,' said Jack, simply.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LAST RUN.

THE commencement of the hunting-season, in the first week of November, was ushered in by a fine bright morning, with just that tinge of frost in the air which so often predicts a good scenting-day. The hedges had lost their summer covering, and now presented but a bare network of branches and twigs, and, though the ditches were still somewhat blind, everything denoted that all was ready for regular hunting to begin.

An unusually early harvest had allowed the legitimate business of cub-hunting to be begun at a much earlier date than usual. Old Tom

Harkholler and his attendant satellites had been busy among the cubs, and every litter had been well routed up at least once or twice. Rain had fallen plenteously for the last week, which made the ground ride soft and afforded good going. In fact, all conditions pointed to a successful opening of the season which was inaugurated as was customary by a meet at Forde Manor, where a capital breakfast awaited all comers.

The scene in front of the house was a bright and animated one. Numerous horses, from the high-conditioned hunter to the rough-coated farmer's hackney, were being led up and down on the well-gravelled drive, whilst their respective owners were inside partaking of the good cheer provided by their lady M.F.H. Dog-carts, polo-carts, waggonettes, and landaus drove up in rapid succession and discharged their loads of befurred and cloaked womankind and children, all bent on seeing the great sight. On the green sward of the park beyond the lawn, Tom Harkholler and his whips in charge of the pack were moving gently to and fro; now and

then stopping to have a moment's conversation with some extra enthusiastic member of the Hunt, as to the merits of the young entry or the condition of the pack in general.

Altogether it was a gay and cheery scene; but, as one lawn-meet is much the same as another, it is useless to waste time in further description; so let us get 'forrard' and find the 'little red rascal,' for whose destruction this concourse of men, women, horses, and hounds have assembled.

One figure among the group is, however, conspicuous by his absence—Jack Ramsay. He had heard from Rufus that the first draw was to be a small gorse some two miles distant, and thither he had betaken himself to avoid the awkwardness of meeting Violet for the first time in public. He had not arrived at this decision till after debating the matter well in his mind. His conversations with Margaret Beaumont and Rufus had pointed conclusively to the fact that his place in Violet's heart had never been filled by another, and he determined

to again renew his suit, confident that this time he would meet with success.

Still, he told himself, it were best to delay matters till he could meet and talk to Violet quietly; and in this he was influenced by the wish to avoid giving the woman he so dearly loved even the slight cause of embarrassment that a first meeting in public might occasion her. He thought it, therefore, wisest to keep away from the meet, drop unobserved into the run, and take the opportunity of a quiet ride home after the day's sport to speak his mind and learn his fate. As to the result, he felt sanguine enough; for Squire Bentley, with whom he had dined the previous evening, had spoken very openly to him on the subject. His old godfather told of the second refusal Lord Guisard had experienced, and his own conviction that he (Jack) was the favourite; adding, as he wished him good-night with a hearty slap on the back,

'Go in, my boy, and win!'

Brenda had been sent over to the Littleforde

stables, and, though she might be deemed rather a handful for a man with only one arm, was his mount for the day.

And what, meantime, were Violet's feelings? The poor girl had only returned with Kate from London on the previous afternoon, and was fairly overwhelmed with joy, pity, and the rush of mingled hopes and fears, as Rufus proudly announced his news. That good-natured giant, standing with his back to a roaring log-fire in the hall, was so occupied with the pleasure of surprising Violet (who had sat down for a few minutes after taking off her wraps) that, in watching a flush of surprised delight that overspread her face, he never noticed the ghastly pallor of his wife.

It was Violet herself who, after a few moments of breathless silence, suddenly said, in a low, almost repentant tone,

'Poor Kate! You are worn out after the journey, dear. How thoughtless we are!—Rufus, do help her upstairs; she must lie down

now, and we will send her dinner to her room if she is very tired.'

Then as soon as possible she sought refuge gladly in the privacy of her own study, where she could give way unrestrained to a little shower of tears through which she smiled.

'He has come back—come back to me!' her heart seemed singing the refrain; yet again when she thought of how ill Jack Ramsay had been, how enfeebled still, as Rufus said, and crippled of his left arm, it melted with tender sorrow over her lover. Violet went very early to rest that night, yet for hours was wakeful with tremors of anticipation; delicious hopes that he had returned to see herself, because he loved her, uneasy fears that somehow she might be mistaken.

And what of Kate? To her the news was a terrible shock. In a flash, she knew that, sooner or later, the story of her own baseness must be revealed. The lovers could no longer be parted; she felt it must be so, and quailed at the revela-

tion of her perfidy towards both. Oh! she had wished (at least, she believed so,) that they might come together, but that was to be after her death. She had inwardly repented; but, alas! had never had strength of mind to confess! And, worst of all, though she had struggled hard to maintain her good resolves to think of Ramsay no more, but as one she had wronged; yet, at the thought that he was so near, the old fierce passion seemed to leap up in her heart, and swayed her like a reed in the storm.

Poor troubled soul! clasping her hands, she tormented herself; but knew not what to do. At last the weakness of her tired, thin frame brought the despairing feeling that she would do *nothing*. The game was over; let events take their fated course. Only—only she must see Jack on the morrow. She would go to the meet and ride, and taste the happiness once more of being near him, while he as yet was unwitting of her treachery; ay, and that if she died for it!

With this thought uppermost in her mind,

Kate announced her determination of riding on the opening-day; and, though Violet and Rufus, knowing how weak and wasted her frame was from illness, and how incapable she had become of undergoing any great fatigue or exertion, expostulated with her in energetic tones, their pleadings were all in vain.

'I shall only go and see you find, and then come quietly home,' was the rejoinder. 'I may not be able to do so often again, and you would not deny me this one little pleasure?' she added, meaningly, with a look of sadness in her glorious dark eyes. And so, as usual, wilful woman had her way.

The breakfast at last was over, and most of the company well primed with 'jumping-powder.' Violet had received her guests with her heart fluttering like a bird each time the door opened to admit fresh arrivals. She was wondering if Jack would appear; and had even thought of sending Harlequin early down to Littleforde that morning, to await his real owner's orders. Then she refrained; for no message or sign having

come from the white house beyond the park-wall, and that even the faithful Margaret did not appear as usual, the girl supposed, with a sinking heart, that, in his crippled condition, poor Jack was no doubt unable to hunt. That must be it! and he had no mind probably to see them all enjoying the sport he loved so well, but could no longer share.

Rufus could have told her very differently, and that, with all his old pluck, Jack fully meant to be among them. Mr. Bentley, too, might easily have said that he had sent over Brenda for his godson; indeed, the good old man was on thorns to see how Ramsay would acquit himself with one arm. But it so happened that neither of the men chanced to enlighten Miss Vyvian. They somehow both imagined that of course Violet 'did know;' and were perhaps a little shy of mentioning Jack that morning, guessing, as both smiled broadly upon the girl, that her feelings might be secretly excited, though she kept a brave front, and tried to be

as good a hostess and as keen an M.F.H. as ever.

And Violet—feeling far more shy—never asked them about Jack.

So, after vainly watching for Ramsay's appearance, she mounted Harlequin, and the cavalcade was soon in motion, proceeding at a good, round trot to Pile's gorse, the covert to be drawn first. This was situated on the slope of a hill facing the south, and afforded nice dry lying, being well sheltered from the easterly winds by a belt of young spruce and larch-trees. The gorse was in places somewhat thin and old, but between the patches here and there were some snug warm corners, with brambles and tussocks of grass that offered a snug and inviting spot for a comfort-loving fox to curl himself up in, and bask in the scant warmth afforded by a winter sun. From the top of the hill a lovely view presented itself. The large pastures of the vale trended away in a grand panorama to the blue hills that fringed the coast in the

distance; whilst the fences, as represented by little black lines, looked so easy, and so very different from what they were in reality. A fox getting away from this place was bound to afford a run. Not a cover was to be seen for some three or four miles, the nearest being a square clump of Scotch firs that loomed out dark, in strong contrast to the bright surrounding landscape.

Jack had stationed himself behind a thick black-thorn fence, down wind, at the low end of the gorse; and here, unseen himself, he could watch the spot where his former experience told him the fox would most likely break. The field had all assembled on the brow of the hill, whilst Tom Harkholler and the pack were busy trying to find their fox. Hounds had dashed into the gorse with that eagerness which denotes a certain find, and were now spreading and trying every likely-looking spot along the side of the hill, while Tom's cheery 'Yooi—in there, my beauties! Yooi! try for 'im, good lasses!' rang out on the pleasant autumn air.

Not much encouragement is needed, however; for the pack are keen as mustard. One or two hounds lash their sides with their sterns as they feather across an open patch in the gorse, but they are tried veterans, and the line is too faint for them to throw their tongues with certainty. Suddenly Brenda pricks her ears, and Jack, casting his eyes forward, sees a little reddish-brown object pop out of the cover through the fence at the bottom, pause for a moment as if to see the coast is clear, and then, with a defiant whisk of his white-tagged brush, dash boldly over the open, with his head set straight across the vale. At the same moment old Priestess throws her tongue in covert, Frenzy, Fairmaid, Artful, and Lavender all add their voices in confirming testimony, and then there is a burst of hound-music that makes the hillside re-echo again as the pack crash down-hill through the gorse and bracken.

The Marshwood Vale Hunt is too well drilled for any shouting or holloaing to take place, and as Jack lifts his hat high in air to

proclaim the 'gone away!' nothing except the remark of, 'There he goes!' is uttered by a few horsemen at the top of the hill; and beyond the 'tweet, tweet, tweet!' of Tom's horn, and the 'get away forrard, hounds!' of the whips, as they crack their ponderous thongs, no sound breaks the stillness, except the chorus of the pack now in full cry. Down the hillside they sweep like an avalanche, and crash through the fence at the bottom where they just hover for a moment till Jack, dropping his reins, cheers them on the line.

'Who is that, Tom?' enquired Violet, as she emerged at the bottom of the covert by the old huntsman's side, and saw the pack, running hard, now a good field ahead, with a single horseman close behind them, and lying a little to their right. 'He can ride, anyhow,' she added, as the rider and horse negotiated a remarkably stiff double in faultless style.

'Lor' bless 'ee, miss, ye don't mean to say you don't know,' replied the old man, as they galloped along side by side. 'Why, I should a' thought you

could have picked out the captin and Brenda among a 'undred,' he added, with a sly twinkle in his keen blue eye.

'Why! so it is,' answered Violet, in as indifferent a tone as she could assume, though she felt a hot flush overspreading her face. 'O! how *could* I mistake him?' she said inwardly to herself; and, letting Harlequin out, she drew ahead.

As soon as they found, Rufus had turned to his wife, whose quick eye had long ago marked the one-armed horseman, and said, in tones of gentle entreaty,

'Now, my darling, you will go home quietly, won't you?'

'Yes, yes, of course,' was the somewhat impatient response. 'Don't you stick here; go on.' And so Rufus obeyed, and went.

The sight of Jack, however, had acted like a magnet on Kate. Was she going quietly home when he and Violet might be thrown together? no, a thousand times no! Weak and ill as she felt, she was determined to keep near

Ramsay as long as she could, and directly her husband's back was turned she set off at a gallop in the wake of several of the field, who were making for a line of gates that led to the bottom of the hill.

In the meantime the pack were running nearly mute, except when a hound every now and then threw its tongue; and, with a breast-high scent, they were streaming over the broad pastures in a compact body, carrying a grand head. Jack, closely followed by Violet (who, thanks to Harlequin's speed, had rapidly gained on the now flying pack), with half-a-dozen others, still maintained the lead; and so some two miles were got over, till at length a piece of sticky fallow brought hounds' noses down.

As Ramsay pulled up, his face, hitherto so pale, was flushed by the excitement of the gallop, and he hardly at the moment noticed Violet as she came up alongside of him, who, tendering her hand, said, frankly, but in low and somewhat trembling tones,

'How do you do, Captain Ramsay? I am *so*

glad to see you again, and was very sorry to hear of your accident.'

'Thank you,' he replied, simply, grasping her hand and retaining it for a moment in his, as he looked her straight in the face with eyes brimming over with love and devotion. 'Any accident is worth incurring to get such a greeting from you, Miss Vyvian. And you cannot, I am sure, be one thousandth part as glad to see me as *I* am to see you.'

But this was no time for pretty speeches, for Tom had held his hounds forrard, and, as they once more got on grass, they hit the line, and streamed away with heads up and sterns down. This momentary check, however, had enabled that division of the field which Kate O'Brien had followed to join the leaders; and, stung to the quick by the meeting she had witnessed between Jack and Violet, she now rode a line of her own, determined not to be left behind. Rufus and Violet had, to their astonishment, only just become aware of her presence, and stared aghast; but hounds were going

too fast for them to attempt to stop her now.

On they speed, over rough rush-grown pastures from which many a snipe rises with a startled 'sc-a-a-pe,' twisting away in tortuous flight; over a rolling stretch of heather and stunted gorse; over sticky ploughed land which further increases the advantage the pack has already gained, till they reach the group of dark firs before alluded to.

This covert consisted of some eight to ten acres. Silvery birches grew at intervals amid the more sombre pines, their white stems standing out in striking yet pleasant contrast; patches of gorse, still sprinkled here and there with their showers of golden blossom (for 'tis said, and with truth, that the gorse is *never* out of bloom); bog-myrtle, tall heather, brown bracken, and rank grass, all flourished luxuriantly together; and through this tangled growth the eager pack went tumbling and dashing, forcing their way along, intoxicated by the hot scent, and the (to them) delicious aroma left behind by the fugitive fox!

A deep, holding, clayey ride enabled the field to follow them through the wood, though perforce at diminished speed.

Here at last Violet and Rufus had an opportunity of begging Kate to stop; but in vain. In the first place, she was inebriated with the excitement of the gallop; and secondly, she was influenced by a feeling of mad jealousy, and laughed to scorn the entreaties both of her husband and friend.

'O! don't bother,' she said, petulantly, in reply to the former; 'would *you* stop if *I* asked you in a run like this?' and she pushed past him, her horse squirting some muddy water in his face as she did so.

On emerging from the covert, a few tail hounds were seen straining every muscle to overtake their flying comrades now just topping the fence out of the next field.

'Yonder they go!' said Jack, pointing with his whip, and immediately set "Brenda" going, closely followed by Violet and Kate O'Brien.

Some half-dozen fields were gone over at

racing pace, and then a tell-tale line of willows denoted the presence of a brook; not a very formidable one truly, but still too big to be trifled with after the pace at which hounds had been running. Kate knew the place of old, and a fierce desire arose in her heart to show the way over the water. As they neared it Jack, followed by Violet, bore away to the right where the brook seemed narrower, and the take-off and landing sounder. Kate imagined they were making for a ford, and that if she kept straight on she would gain a decided advantage; so shaking up her horse, and giving him a couple of smart cuts with her whip, she drove him at the water.

But pace and the reckless way in which Kate had been riding were beginning to tell, and her horse, though he faced the leap bravely, pecked on landing. Kate nearly lost her seat, but recovered herself instantly only to find to her chagrin that hounds had turned right away from her, and were running up the side of the brook close by where Jack, Violet, Rufus,

and two or three others had jumped it. By want of judgment she had lost her pride of place, and she ground her teeth with rage and vexation at the thought of her foolishness. But Kate grew still more foolish; anger blinded her, and, though she felt her horse was getting exhausted, she never gave that much-enduring quadruped a thought, but urged him on at the top of his speed. She again caught up her companions, who had by now crossed a couple of fields enclosed with small and easy-flying fences. Beyond these, a truly formidable obstacle confronted them—a high double bank with tough and massive binders newly cut and laid; a wide ditch on either side which had been lately dug and cleaned out, the mud from which had been piled on the top of the bank between the binders, with a drop of unknown depth on the far side! As the trio approached it almost abreast, Jack's quick eye detected a spot to the right where it looked less stiff, and which the hedger had not yet reached in his task. A hairy looking place, in very truth, but still

sound; and at this he turned his horse, calling to Violet and Kate to follow him.

The latter heeded him not, however, nor yet the agonized cry of her husband,

'Not there, Kate—not there, for heaven's sake!'

Besides, she saw hounds turning towards her as they raced across the field beyond. She would gain a decided advantage by going straight on, she argued, and they *must* soon kill, or lose their fox! So summoning all her remaining strength, she drove her now unwilling and thoroughly beaten horse at the frowning fence.

The poor animal was too honest to refuse. He galloped at it in a half-hearted sort of way, with drooping head and heaving flanks—did his best—floundered on to the top of the bank; but here exhaustion told its tale, his feet were held by the adhesive, only half-dried, almost liquid mud. In trying to jump out, his legs caught the opposing binders, and he fell heavily over into the next field. Meanwhile Jack, Violet, Rufus,

and one or two others landed safely lower down —only in time to see a dark, inanimate form beneath the struggling horse, which lay half in and half out of the ditch.

'Good God, she is killed!' was Jack's involuntary exclamation, as he hastened up, and, throwing himself out of his saddle, seized Kate's horse short by the bridle with his one hand in the endeavour to stop its struggling. 'Are you hurt, Mrs. O'Brien?' he asked.

But no answer came from those ashen lips, only a little thin stream of blood oozed out from between the clenched teeth;—a ghastly pallor overspread Kate's cheeks, and her long lashes drooped over the closed eyes.

CHAPTER XIII.

'POOR RUFUS!'

In the meantime, Rufus, Violet, and a few others hurried to the spot where Kate had fallen.

All the colour died out of poor O'Brien's generally so ruddy face, as he threw himself down on his knees beside his wife, and broke out with a wild cry:

'Kate! Kate! say you're not hurt. O, my darling, speak to me—Kate! just one word.'

But only silence followed. Violet's usual self-control now gave way also, and she burst into a flood of tears. With some difficulty, poor Kate's apparently lifeless form was extricated

from beneath her fallen horse; and as Rufus lifted her up her head fell back limply over his arm, and the great coils of her glossy hair unrolled in a dark cloud over the sleeve of his red coat. Laying her down very tenderly, Rufus rushed for some water, and Ramsay forced a few drops of brandy from his flask between her lips. Then she opened her eyes for a second, moved her hand feebly a little towards him, and while her gaze rested on Jack's features with a bewildered surprise, as if wondering what had happened to herself, through which shone a look of unutterably loving joy, she murmured,

'Jack—my—poor head,' then again sank into insensibility.

In the meantime, a gate had been unhinged, and now Kate's form was gently raised and laid upon it. The men took their coats off, and tenderly covered the apparently lifeless burden; and thus the sad procession wended its way to the nearest farm-house.

At the very first moment after the accident, Violet had implored one of the men near her to

gallop for the doctor. Almost an hour however elapsed before, with the utmost despatch, he arrived; and during those moments, so terribly slow to those who waited around her, Kate showed little or no signs of animation.

Violet, aided by Farmer Wilford's wife and daughter, had been using every means they could all three think of to bring Kate back to consciousness; but as yet in vain. Presently, however, the door softly opened, and Margaret Beaumont came in, bringing more restoratives, and assuming at once, to poor Violet's bewildered and grateful joy, the command of the situation, with the air of—what she really was—a thoroughly experienced nurse. But though she cheered Rufus in sympathetic fragments of sentences uttered between her ministrations, and patted Violet on the shoulder with comforting affection, her sweet brown eyes met those of the girl, when O'Brien had his back turned, with a sorrowful look, and she shook her head.

Jack Ramsay had brought Margaret. He had

thought at once of borrowing Farmer Wilford's spring-cart. Violet would need her assistance so greatly, he knew; his mind turning instinctively to care for her, to avoid too heavy a responsibility being laid on those young shoulders.

It was Rufus who first detected a faint quiver of the eyelids in the deadly-pale face at which he gazed, with all the old, passionate love rekindled in his heart; later slights and coldness forgotten; only the memories of his young bride, his beautiful girl-wife, surging up in his honest, tender mind.

He stepped backward and gripped Violet's arm hard to make her see, too, in his intense excitement. Then, slackening his grasp as suddenly, he dropped down on one knee by the pillow to watch closer, exclaiming rapturously,

'Look! look! she is better—she is coming to! Ah, she knows me now; she has opened her eyes . . . O, Kate, my heart's darling, my own Kitty, you'll be yourself soon—you will,

you will!' Rufus was babbling in his wild joy, almost laughing outright as he watched Kate, who had now opened her eyes and was slowly and faintly, nevertheless evidently regaining her senses. The others, too, perhaps carried away by the enthusiasm of O'Brien's faith, felt a sudden upleaping of gladness. Hopes revived, and even the farmer's wife, who had never seen Kate before, wiped her eyes with a feeling of thankfulness in her heart. It seems such a great and happy thing to save a fellow-creature, for awhile, from passing from this earth that we know into the unknown mystery beyond.

Meanwhile, the doctor's gig drove rapidly into the farmyard, where half of the Hunt horses were being led about on the littered straw, or stood tied up in cow-sheds. A group of their pink-coated riders, all Marshwood Vale men, with Jack Ramsay amongst them, waited outside the farm door, exchanging subdued whispers and telling each other what each man had seen of poor Mrs. O'Brien's riding from the start, and

comparing their various versions of 'how it all happened.'

A flock of pigeons strutting on the ground flew upwards with a sudden whirr, disturbed by the wheels of the gig. A couple of half-bred sheep-dogs sprang out of their barrels, and strained on their chains barking savagely. Some pigs grunted undisturbed in the farm-litter, and hens scratched and pecked. The scene struck Jack Ramsay by the contrast between these common incidents of daily life that were going on around as usual, and thoughts of the motionless figure within doors whose fluttering breath was perhaps soon to pass away in feeble gasps.

'How strange it is, after all!' he thought to himself. 'Here one hour alive and well—gone the next out of sight, and hearing, and earthly knowledge.'

The doctor, with a quick, decided step, entered the room where Kate lay, and all eyes turned towards him in deepest anxiety; as if his verdict of life or death could be altered by that mute,

imploring appeal. The suspense did not last long. A few, brief moments of examination, during which Kate's eyelids languidly drooped once more.

'Ah! she's tired now, but she's better, doctor. You see for yourself she's better,' broke in Rufus, with an irrepressible outburst of longing to hear his hopes confirmed. 'She'll come all right soon—won't she now?' His blue eyes had an expression of such piteous entreaty that Violet felt her own eyes fill with tears at the sight.

The doctor kindly laid his hand on O'Brien's shoulder, and drew him away from the bedside to the end of the room.

'My dear fellow, you must try to bear up; don't deceive yourself with false hopes. It is the will of God——'

'You mean—O, no! for the love of heaven don't say *that*,' uttered Rufus, wildly, but almost voicelessly, his eyes staring fixedly at the other's face.

'She is terribly injured; you could not *wish* her to live on in such a state, her sufferings would

be frightful. As it is, be thankful she feels no pain . . . It will not last very long now.'

At these most kindly-spoken but terrible words, poor Rufus quite broke down in such anguish of grief that it was entirely uncontrollable. Only the urgent whispers of those around him, that Kate would be disturbed, seemed to have some influence in arresting the strong flood of his sorrow. Then Margaret Beaumont touched his arm gently; and, while he kept his head buried hopelessly in his hands, she led the strong man out of the room, weeping like a little child.

Kate once more faintly opened her eyes. Her lips moved, and, as Violet bent down to catch the words, she asked, in a voice more clear than the listener would have thought possible,

'Was that Rufus? . . . I heard some—one sobbing, I thought. Tell me—Violet—is it all over with me? Do not be afraid.'

'Dear, dearest Kate. You are much worse than we thought. You—you are called away before us, Kate. But we must soon follow you, you know; sooner or later,' faltered Violet.

('If only Margaret could have told her! she would have said it so differently: so much better,' thought the girl, with a keen pang of self-distrustful regret.) But she was comforted a little when, after a momentary silence and closing of the eyes, while a spasm passed over those pale features, Kate whispered,

'I knew it must be so . . . I am glad you are near.—We were always like—sisters. But, Violet, I am not ready to die! . . . There is a burden upon me—a sin——'

'There is forgiveness for all sins, dear Kate, if you only ask it and believe: if you *do* repent.'

'I repented—bitterly. But I never confessed . . . Can *you* forgive me, Violet? If so, God will.'

'I will forgive you, I promise, fully and freely; whatever it may be,' answered Violet, trembling as she knelt by Kate's bedside. At that moment she seemed to go back to the old school-days, when they had been such loving friends, to the old jokes—Kate's pranks and peccadilloes,

for many of which Violet had shared censure, unjustly yet willingly.

Kate's black eyes opened large, with a solemn, earnest appeal, as she gasped,

'Can you forgive when I tell you it concerns—Jack Ramsay? . . . I did you a great wrong—and him, still more! You remember that night . . . when I came to your room . . . when I told you he——'

'Yes, yes; I know,' uttered Violet, breathlessly, almost beyond herself, as Kate's voice broke and died away. 'I remember it all.'

'I told you a lie,' breathed back Kate, straight. 'I loved him—I loved him! It was an awful temptation when you asked me. But he . . . he never loved me! I know it now. He paid me attention, that was all. Then I grew wild—mad! My God! I did love him!'

'Don't think of it now, dear Kate. It will all be forgotten, wiped out. Don't think of it, more,' repeated Violet, softly kissing her friend's cheek, although trembling violently. Oh, how *could* Kate have so deceived her!

'I *must!*—There was his letter, too. I took it and hid it for months. Then I dropped it behind the marble table—where it was found,' pursued Kate, with fluttering breath, in gasps that came so feebly they might soon end altogether, as Violet remembered with pity and alarm. 'Listen, Violet. Ask Jack Ramsay to forgive . . . me . . . for your sake. Ask him to see me.—Quick!—I *must* see him before I die.'

The dying woman's face wore such a look of longing, piteous entreaty, Violet felt as if she could not assure and soothe her rapidly enough.

'I will tell him. He will be sure to come—he will be sure to come,' she exclaimed, softly; and, signing to Margaret, who at that moment came back, to take her place, she glided out to find Ramsay. What a strange explanation and reconciliation theirs was!

In the farm-house passage, outside the room in which Kate was dying—a few breathless words whispered on Violet's part, with a be-

seeching gaze, imploring the man's forgiveness for the poor woman within. A start from Ramsay, and a look of great, indignant, almost horrified surprise.

'What! She told you I made love to her, —*and you believed it?*'

'How could I help it? She said you had changed, and given her up; but that could not undo what had gone before. It was a terrible, awful falsehood—Oh, if you knew what I suffered that night, before I wrote to you never to see me again!'

'But you believe me now, Violet, when I tell you my conscience is clear on that score.'

'I do! I do!—I believe you, now, and for always.'

A long grasp of each other's hands, a long look in each other's eyes——

Then Violet murmured:

'Come and say you forgive her; come quickly.'

'I will forgive her, dear. I must, now she

is dying; and the more so that you ask me.'

Together they entered the room, where lay the unhappy woman who had almost wrought ruin to both their lives; and both felt, even in that solemn moment, a thrill of ineffable joy at the knowledge that they were now one in heart and mind, from thenceforth and for always.

It was a strange scene. Kate O'Brien lying so helpless and still, her black hair loosely falling about her, the pink hunting-bodice, that had been cut open and slashed by the doctor, in striking contrast with the white coverings of the bed on which they had laid her. Violet, too, in her habit, with a similarly, gay, little scarlet-coat, was now kneeling by the bedside with her hands clasped, and a rapt expression on her pale face.

As they entered, both had seen Kate's features take a shrinking, scared look; without glancing up she closed her eyes, and remained speechless. She would have hidden her face

from meeting Jack Ramsay's reproachful gaze, but that she had no power left to stir her head.

Then Jack's voice was heard through the stillness, that was otherwise only broken by the half-sobbing breathing of the women. He spoke kindly, with a solemn yet tender pity in his deep tones, that sounded like the accents of an angelic being in the fast-closing ears that so faintly yet so eagerly listened.

'I have come, as you wished, Mrs. O'Brien, to say that we are friends again. Whatever you grieve at having done to me, I forgive fully and freely; as I hope to be myself forgiven by my Maker my own far greater sins . . . Will you not speak to me?'

Kate's face quivered; she raised slowly her heavy eyelids and gazed up in Ramsay's face with a long, strange look that none of those who saw it ever forgot.

'God bless you,' she said, in a broken voice. 'Will you kiss me once . . . It is not wrong —Violet—is it?—because—I am *dying*.'

Jack met the honest eyes of the girl he loved turned upon him with such a trustful, pitying expression that he read her mind at once. Then he stooped gravely, and kissed Kate on the forehead.

A moment or so later, Violet made a sign of alarm. She noticed—what was it?—a grey shade, a change she could not define, pass over Kate's face. Even before she did so, the doctor's voice, for he had been standing in the background, whispered to Margaret Beaumont to call O'Brien quickly. In a few seconds Rufus was there, his grief arrested by the suddenness (to him) of this summons. He threw himself down on his knees beside his wife, the others all making room for him; he put his arm about her, knowing that he clasped for the last time her living form.

'Kate! one last word to me,' he implored, bending down his ear anxiously to catch any faint sounds from those dear lips.

'Poor—Rufus!'

That was all;—but to the man, the husband,

who caught the feebly-uttered words, it was everything. Then, as they all listened, the breathing surely stopped. No, it went on again.

'She is gone!' said the doctor, presently; and his voice, though quiet, startled them, in the hush that had fallen in the room.

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CHAPTER XIV.

ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL.

And so poor Kate was dead; her troubled spirit had passed away from earth.

A few days later they laid her to rest in a quiet corner of the churchyard, not very far from Cyril Vyvian's grave. The grass was already green last summer about the plain slab and cross that marked his resting-place; the flowers planted by Violet's own hands were thriving, and would bloom again next year. And the thought rose in the latter's mind that so, likewise, when the sods upon Kate O'Brien's earthly bed should spring, and daisies blow

about it, all thought of what trouble she had brought upon herself and those who were her friends would have died out, and only memory of Kate's better qualities, her beauty and high spirits, and fascination of manner revive again in their minds.

It was by no means so largely-attended a funeral as that of Cyril Vyvian had been. Kate, however admired, had made few real friends in her lifetime. But many, and especially almost all the members of the Marshwood Vale Hunt, came out of good feeling for Rufus O'Brien, and as a mark of respect towards their young M.F.H., whose small circle of intimate associates had thus for the second time of late been so suddenly broken into by death.

When the last flowers had been strewn, and the last look taken at Kate O'Brien's grave, the chief mourners went slowly back to Forde Manor. Meanwhile Mr. Woods, the cheery vicar, looked after them, and said within himself,

'Well, well! a funeral to-day (what a handsome woman she was, too!), and three christ-

enings on Sunday; and soon, unless I am a false prophet—a wedding. For Captain Ramsay was not standing by Miss Vyvian's side all through to-day's service by chance. Poor, dear girl! how often I have thought of that evening when I surprised them together in the wood . . . Well, no doubt they have had their troubles since then; but now let's hope all will come right. What a fine fellow he is!—he will make a right good landlord.'

On returning home, Violet led the way to the drawing-room. As a rule, they never sat in this room in the afternoon; but with womanly thoughtfulness she had arranged it should be so to-day, lest the sight of Kate's empty favourite chair in the hall, where they usually gathered, might overcome poor Rufus.

A cheerful fire blazed in the old-fashioned drawing-room with its white panelled walls; and through the windows there was to be seen a golden western glow behind the great cedars.

Rufus O'Brien came in with a blank, dis-

pirited expression, went slowly up to the fire-place, and stood warming himself mechanically without a word. Presently he turned round, and said, with a look of surprise,

'Why are we here?' As Violet did not immediately answer him, a gleam of comprehension shot over his features, lighting them up with a glow of friendly gratitude in spite of his haggard and grief-stricken appearance. 'Ah! I understand. It is like ye, dear soul, kindest of friends! Now, look ye here, Violet, I have something to say to you and to Jack Ramsay, too.' Whereupon O'Brien turned his face upon both these two who stood near him, and went on with emotion, and in a deeply earnest tone, 'I want to say that no two people could feel more for me, I believe, nor be more sorry for her that's gone. And so I ask, as a favour of you both, not to delay your wedding-day on *her* account. I ask it for her sake; it's what she would never have wished herself, for, as ye all know, she was the most generous soul alive—my poor girl! Come now—let it be soon, Violet . . .

Ramsay, it's maybe a queer time to congratulate you, and say—what's only the truth from my soul—that I'm glad. But good wishes need never come amiss. And though neither of you, I believe, have ever told me all was settled between you—well, you'll excuse me for old friendship's sake.'

Violet smiled upon her good friend with tears in her eyes. Ramsay silently held out his hand; and the two men exchanged a warm grasp of fellow-feeling.

Then a little murmur of other voices became half-audible in the room. Margaret Beaumont had come back with the others from the funeral, and she now thought it best to slip away unobserved. But Dolly, who rambling with her nurse in the park had met them, and begged to 'come in with mother,' was now hanging back and whimpering objections. Suddenly her murmur, that was hitherto indistinct to the others, swelled louder into a plaintive lament.

'But I *did* want to say good-bye to Rufus.'

'And so she shall,' exclaimed O'Brien, as he caught up the little girl in his arms, and hugged her; while Dolly, who had not seen her favourite big playfellow for a week, and who had been repeatedly told he was in great sorrow, threw her chubby arms round his neck and covered his face with kisses. (Perhaps, in her heart, Dolly was not very sorry 'that Mrs. O'Brien was gone to heaven,' as nurse had solemnly imparted to her, and would never come back. But she was awed, and perceived that others were grieved, so kept her opinion to herself and tried to be sympathetic.)

'Poor little soul, she's tired, I'm sure,' said Rufus, loth to set down the child. 'I'll carry her home—if I may.'

And Margaret, feeling that he found more comfort in the caresses of the little one, who loved and clung to him, than in any attempted consolation friends could utter, gently assented. So the three went outside on to the terrace, and through the woods to Littleforde.

Left alone in the big drawing-room, Jack

looked at Violet. Her eyes dropped a little, yet, by mute consent, they drew nearer to each other. And Ramsay's right arm—his poor solitary one, as Violet thought, with a rush of pity far more intense than he felt for himself—stole round the girl's slim waist.

'Darling,' he said, in the old loving tones she had missed so sorely. 'I think Rufus is right. Shall it be as he says?'

'I wish what you wish,' replied Violet, low; but raising her eyes a moment to his with a look of utter trust and such a peaceful, holy-minded joy on her face, as seemed to Ramsay like a light from heaven.

Awhile they stood there silent, but side by side, and held in each other's arms; and thus they watched the light fade and the twilight deepen. A solemn hush was upon them both, for the shadow of that great mystery of life, its Whither, could not yet pass from their minds. But yet they were brave and hopeful for the future, bring what it might, and perhaps their

happiness was all the truer in that it was so still.

Then Jack presently roused and drew the girl he loved back into the cheerful radius of the fire-glow.

'Dear,' he said. 'Do you remember you were standing just here the first night I came to dine at Forde Manor?'

A very quiet wedding may be just as happy an omen as one where there is more bustle and excitement, when a solemn service seems mingled with champagne and laughter, orange-blossoms, tears, and smiles. At least, so Jack Ramsay and Violet thought, when in the early spring-time they were married; and few, very few were present to see them made man and wife. But as they drove away later through the lanes, where primroses were peeping and the bleating of lambs came from behind the budding hedges, what groups and groups of smiling faces by cottage-doors gave them respectful good-wishes,

and how many bunches of sweet violets were flung into the carriage by the children's hands.

'I always knew it would be so. At least, I mean one could see they were made for each other,' exclaimed Mrs. Blatherwick, enthusiastically, who to her great joy had been one of the intimate few invited to the wedding.

'I thought the same——' chimed in Major Ball, who had come back from Monte Carlo expressly, as he profusely explained, because he took such interest in dear old Jack and that most charming of girls—Miss Vyvian. In fact, as Billy Blatherwick gruffly muttered in an undertone, which nobody heeded,

'He thinks they couldn't get spliced without him.'

'Well, I think we three had as good an inkling as anybody else of what seemed at one time to be a rather hopeless love-affair,' confidentially remarked old Squire Bentley, with a beaming smile, as he turned to Rufus O'Brien and

Mrs. Beaumont, who were standing with him a little apart.

'Faith, it was queer how it all came right,' said good Rufus, simply. 'God bless them both!'

'Amen,' gently said Margaret Beaumont.

And then Dolly, in all the splendour of her bridesmaid's frock, was discovered stuffing her pocket with wedding-cake, 'for her doll to dream on,' and had to be conveyed home, escorted by her chief vassal O'Brien, before the latter betook himself to the rooms in the wing still standing of the Manor-house, where he was now installed as the new agent of the Forde estate, to general satisfaction, the old agent having lately retired on a pension.

'It is quite right they should have a quiet wedding; but wait and see what a welcome we'll give the happy pair when they come home,' said the rest of the neighbourhood.

And a splendid welcome it was. For, as everyone agreed, after her trials resulting from

her father's will and her cousin's death, Violet Vyvian *deserved* to be made happy, and Jack Ramsay was just the right man, they believed, to make her so.

THE END.

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